Dissent as Therapy:
The Case of the Veterans of the American War in Vietnam

Cristina Alsina Rísquez
Universitat de Barcelona
alsina@ub.edu

Most of the fiction that was produced by soldier-writers after the American War in Vietnam has been characterized as therapeutic, with its main objective understood to be healing the wounds caused by the traumatic experience of war. This approach has tended to individualize the experience of particular soldier-writers and to conceive of their fiction as a substitute for psychoanalytic therapy, hence cancelling, in the same maneuver, its political agency. By emphasizing the individual process of overcoming "Post Traumatic Stress Disorder," the critical work analyzing the production of these authors has, intentionally or not, obscured the larger political project by which these writers were literally putting their bodies on the line. In their physical and psychological fragmentation, those bodies became the locus of the struggle to establish a new definition of national identity, at a time when the concept had become unstable to say the least. The aim of this article is to return to the fore an emphasis on the politics of dissent in the study of US Vietnam War cultural production.

Keywords: Vietnam War literature; dissent; therapy; Chaim Shatan; political activism

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La disensión como terapia:
el caso de los veteranos de la guerra americana en Vietnam

Gran parte de la ficción producida por los veteranos de la guerra americana en Vietnam se ha categorizado como terapéutica, y se ha postulado que el objetivo principal de esa producción literaria es contribuir a la sanación de las heridas personales causadas por la experiencia traumática de la guerra. Este enfoque ha tendido a la individualización de la experiencia de cada escritor-soldado y a la percepción de su ficción como sustitutiva de la terapia psicoanalítica; al mismo tiempo, esta maniobra interpretativa suprime el potencial político de sus textos. Al enfatizar el proceso individual de superación del "síndrome

de estrés post-traumático," la literatura crítica sobre la producción de estos autores ha oscurecido, a veces de manera intencionada, el proyecto político al que estaban dedicando su vida. Sus cuerpos, rotos física y mentalmente, se convirtieron en el escenario donde se libraba la batalla para reconfigurar la definición de identidad nacional, en un momento histórico en el que la definición hegemónica de nación estaba, cuando menos, bajo sospecha. El objetivo de este artículo es traer de nuevo a un primer plano el carácter eminentemente político y revolucionario de la producción cultural estadounidense relacionada con la guerra en Vietnam.

Palabras clave: literatura de la guerra en Vietnam; disenso; terapia; Chaim Shatan; activismo político

> One would be concerned with the "body politic," as a set of material elements and techniques that serve as weapons, relays, communication routes and supports for the power and knowledge relations that invest human bodies and subjugate them by turning them into objects of knowledge.
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> (Foucault [1975] 1991, 28)

1. Introduction

Half way through *The Big Lebowski* (1998), Jeff "The Dude" Lebowski is having a cup of coffee with Walter Sobchak, his bowling teammate and friend. They are sitting at a diner counter discussing how to proceed in the unraveling of the kidnapping of Bunny, Mr. Lebowski's—The "Big" Lebowski's—wife. The case has taken a turn for the worse and Mr. Lebowski has just received a severed toe, supposedly Bunny's, as a sign of the kidnappers' intention to kill her unless the ransom money is delivered. Unfortunately, the original ransom money has been stolen from the Dude's car, where it was sitting after Walter had convinced him to keep the briefcase with the money and hand the kidnappers one filled with dirty underwear. Whilst Walter boisterously claims the kidnappers are not professional and should not be taken seriously, the Dude is worried about Bunny ending up dead and is increasingly irritated by Walter's attitude. When the waitress admonishes them saying, "Sir, if you don't calm down I'm going to have to ask you to leave," Walter snaps and shouts out: "Lady, I got buddies who died facedown in the muck so you and I could enjoy this family restaurant!" (Cohen and Cohen 1998).

Facing the camera, Walter, the Vietnam veteran, loud and aggressive, prone to thoughtless violence and the Dude, a West Coast countercultural slacker, have become an ironic reference to the cultural and social turmoil of the Vietnam era.[1] The indirect reference to the American War in Vietnam invests them with added meaning which emerges from their intertextual connections to innumerable versions of the stereotypes they are suddenly perceived to embody. At this point, the filmic text displays—and plays with—two different sources of meaning: on the one hand, that derived from the film having "stipulate[d] [its] referential domain by creating a possible world" whereby the Dude and Walter are rendered meaningful by their insertion in a particular plot line and belonging to a particular, unique possible world (Dolezel 1998, 26);[2] and on the other, that derived from the net of dialogic relationships the filmic text establishes with other texts such that the characters become conglomerates of intertextual references

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[1] I am using here Linda Hutcheon's definition of ironic meaning "as relational, as the result of the bringing—even the rubbing—together of the said and the unsaid, each of which takes on meaning only in relation to the other" (1995, 59).

[2] Dolezel's use of the verb 'stipulate' echoes Kripke's definition of 'possible world,' "A possible world isn't a distant country that we are coming across, or viewing through a telescope . . . A possible world is *given by the descriptive conditions we associate with it* . . . 'Possible worlds' are *stipulated*, not *discovered* by powerful telescopes" (1972, 267).

and their meaning can be inferred from the larger shared cultural background. Walter calls to mind the never-ending collection of crazed Vietnam vets that have appeared on screen since the end of the seventies; the Dude, all the hippie war protesters of the counterculture. And the fact that the scene closes with the Dude standing up and leaving Walter behind re-stages what is a pervasive trope in the representation of the social conflict generated by the war: the rejection and neglect of the veterans by the pacifists and war protesters, who accused them of committing the most horrible crimes, and, in turn, the fact that the vets despised the pacifists for not having lived through the life-changing firsthand experience of war and, as a consequence, for not being able to understand them or their outlook on reality.[3] This way the film relies on the familiarity—sometimes even the ennui—of the audience with certain characters to establish the meaning of this scene. Significantly, only a few clichéd sentences in *The Big Lebowski*—"I did not watch my buddies die facedown in the muck so that. . . ," "If there's one thing I learned in Nam. . . ," "That's fucking combat. The man in the black pajamas, Dude. Worthy fuckin' adversary" (Cohen and Cohen 1998)—suffice to establish Walter as one of those crazed Vietnam veterans that have peopled the screens ever since the end of the war.

More likely than not, these veterans are characterized as either physically or emotionally wounded individuals who, in their pain, stand as emblems of the disfigured national body that emerged from the quagmire that was Vietnam. They are pervasively presented as fragmented bodies, bodies in pain, severed pieces of body, bodies in wheelchairs, dead bodies in black body bags. These mangled bodies insistently hamper the process by which a losing country must "begin to re-imagine itself, re-believe in, re-understand, re-experience itself as an intact entity" (Scarry 1985, 93). When, though, the bodies of these characters are intact, their traumatic experience is signaled by the thousand-yard stare, the unfocused stare that reveals them as deranged, maladjusted individuals who are likely to snap at any time and massacre the patrons of the nearest McDonald's.

2. Bodies in Pain

> I could see that this thing—this body I had trained so hard to be strong and quick, this body I now dragged around with me like an empty corpse—was to mean much more than I had ever realized.
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> (Kovic [1976] 1995, 114)

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[3] The lack of empirical evidence to support this notion, and the ideological and political implications of the widespread circulation of this falsity is brilliantly discussed in Jerry Lembcke's *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory, and the Legacy of Vietnam* where he claims that "to get beyond this syndrome—a 'Vietnam syndrome' of America's political culture—the real story of solidarity between the anti-war movement and Vietnam veterans has to be told, and the image of the spat-upon veteran has to be debunked and its mythical dimensions exposed" (1998, 26).

After our war, the dismembered bits
—all those pierced eyes, ear slivers, jaw splinters,
gouged lips, odd tibias, skin flaps, and toes—
came squinting, wobbling, jabbering back . . .

Since all things naturally return to their source,
these snags and tatters arrived, with immigrant uncertainty,
in the United States. It was almost home.
So, now, one can sometimes see a friend or a famous man talking
with an extra pair of lips glued and yammering on his cheek,
and that is why handshakes are often unpleasant,
why it is better, sometimes, not to look another in the eye,
why, at your daughter's breast thickens a hard keloidal scar. (Balaban 1997, 41)

The 'dismembered bits' in Balaban's poem come back as reminders of the fact that, in a war situation, "what is remembered in the body is well remembered; the bodies of massive numbers of participants are deeply altered; [and] those new alterations are carried forward into peace" (Scarry 1985, 112-113), making the process of forgetting, if not impossible, at least troublesome as "whether or not it is verbally memorialized, the record of war survives in the bodies, both alive and buried, of the people who were hurt there" (1985, 113). After the American War in Vietnam, the 'dismembered bits' dripped into society constantly, persistently—stuffed in black bags or as absences in the bodies of the maimed—and their insuppressible arrival added new meaning to the reality of the United States. An indecipherable, uncanny meaning from which most averted their eyes in fear of what it might tell them about themselves, but which was, nevertheless, there, inescapable. The work of writers and artists bears witness to the ways in which the absence of the dead and the obviousness of the missing limbs of the maimed destabilized the cohesive sense of identity defended by American institutions, and problematized the re-establishment of the pre-war order. Thus, to cite only a few examples, Ron Kovic, opens his memoirs *Born on the Fourth of July* by juxtaposing President Kennedy's famous 1961 line from his inauguration address: "Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country" with his own inscription:

I am the living death
the memorial day on wheels
I am your yankee doodle dandy
your john wayne come home
your fourth of july firecracker
exploding in the grave. (Kovic [1976] 1995)

He thus problematizes the proud concept of nation fostered by the administration that sent him to war. Tim O'Brien significantly turns what started as his combat memoirs, *If I Die in a Combat Zone* ([1973] 1995), into a description of his personal transition from reluctant soldier—"I believe, finally, that a man cannot be fully a man until, deciding that something is right, his actions make real the subject bravery of the mind . . . I think the war is wrong. I should not fight in it"—to a bystander who observes, registers and denounces the shame and waste of war (62-63). In Mark Heberle's words: "His positions as bystander/observer and register of shame . . . suggest dual roles of writer and moral reflector. Indeed, the internal narrative of *Combat Zone* depends crucially on O'Brien's taking on those dual roles. Within the memoir, both functions complicate and ultimately displace the ostensible and conventional memoir identity as soldier" (Heberle 2001, 49). Photographer Martha Rösler, in her 1967-1972 series *Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful*, uses the collage technique to embed images from the war within scenes from suburban American living rooms. The dead babies, the anguished faces of the amputees, the dismembered bodies and the tanks, Rösler claims, are not "imposed or forced into those living rooms, they belong there" and they demand a reinterpretation of everyday life in the United States that cannot be easily dismissed (Cottingham 1991): "[Can] you enjoy your car, your TV, your painting in precisely the same way knowing someone died for your enjoyment?" is the question Rösler wants the viewer to confront (Cottingham 1991). She challenges her audience with the same question Kovic throws at his readership: "Is it too real for you to look at? Is this wheelchair too much for you to take?" ([1976] 1995, 137). Maya Lin when thinking of a way to remember the American soldiers who died in Vietnam, instead of imagining a monument "that make[s] heroes and triumphs, victories and conquests, perpetually present and part of life," creates a memorial which is "a special precinct, extruded from life, a segregated enclave where we honor the dead" (Danto 1985, 152). Danto adds, "with monuments we honor ourselves" (1985, 152). According to Joel L. Swerdlow, Maya Lin in contrast came up with a design that "seems able to capture all the feelings of ambiguity and anguish that the Vietnam War evoked in this nation" (Swerdlow, quoted in Petress and King 1990, 6). These are but some of the writers and artists that use unsettling snapshots of bodily or mental fragmentation to conjure up images of the fracture of the social fabric and signify the failure of the political project that had lead the US to Vietnam.

For these artists, writers and intellectuals, then, the body of the soldier became a "contested site where memory, biography and personal histories call attention to, challenge and resist unified and traditional versions of American identity and government, thereby reflecting as well as constructing a diversified and skeptical sense of national identity" (Berdahl 1994, 113). This questioning of the traditional models of national identity translated into significant acts of rejection of the Cold War ideology which had led the country into slow but certain defeat in Vietnam. These dissenting voices permeated all strata of society and eventually—and most forcefully—made their

way into the army itself. The end of the militaristic, imperial nature of US politics was the unanimous demand of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) and of a considerable number of G.I.s, who engaged in all kinds of illegal, underground activities to help stop the war and who were ready to put, literally, their bodies—whole or fragmented—on the line for the anti-war agenda. As Gerald Nicosia describes, the young men, who returned to the US physically and/or psychologically injured "knew that their nation was speaking and acting with the height of hypocrisy, and that their bodies and their lives were being spent to perpetuate that hypocrisy. Such men would bring back to their native land feelings of hatred and shame that would only continue to tear the country apart. Not only that, but they would themselves be a living war wound, which might take the country decades to heal" (2001, 137), and which was interpreted not only as a defiance of the *status quo* but also as proposing a new, more wholesome way of understanding US politics. Thus, Bobby Muller, one of the most vocal VVAW activists, used to repeat in high schools and colleges and in every interview he gave to newspaper reporters or on TV that "the tragedy in my life is not that I'm paraplegic, because I am a lot better man today than I ever was before. The tragedy in my life is that I was, as so many Americans still are, so totally naïve and so trusting . . . I was an idiot because I never asked the question 'Why?' And that is my greatest tragedy—one which was shared by all too many Americans" (quoted in Nicosia 2001, 146).

For Muller, as for so many others, this is what Elaine Scarry labeled the "*referential instability* of the hurt body" of the veteran (1985, 121), which has the potential to highlight fracture and contestation, evidence the opposing forces at stake in the new social order and foster incredulity at the totalizing narratives which attempted to reestablish ideological consensus after the war experience. Scarry defends the position that "the wound is empty of reference" (118); it is exclusively an experience of pain that cancels everything else and destroys language "bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned" (4).[4] That experience is unshareable and any attempt to narrativize it is both a betrayal of the pain felt and a fictionalization through which meaning is superimposed on the sentient body. The bodies of the dead and injured, Scarry contends, will be given meaning by the discourses that, after the war, attempt to make sense of those "sounds and cries" and do so in the name of a post-war national consensus. It is then that "the incontestable reality of the body is continuously reinvoked by both sides" who vie for establishing which side's suffering will be grieved (130), which bodies will be honored and interpreted as generous, brave sacrifices for the necessary larger good

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[4] This cancelling of the centrality of language in human experience is beautifully captured by Kurt Vonnegut's comment on the Dresden massacre in *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969): "It is so short and jumbled and jangled, Sam, because there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre. Everybody is supposed to be dead, to never say anything or want anything ever again. Everything is supposed to be very quiet after a massacre, and it always is, except for the birds.

And what do the birds say? All there is to say about a massacre, things like '*Poo-tee-weet?*'" ([1969] 1991, 14).

and which will be forgotten and fade into oblivion. Post-war discourses "perpetuate a way of dividing lives into those that are worth defending, valuing, and grieving when they are lost, and those that are not quite lives, not quite valuable, recognizable or, indeed, mournable" (Butler 2009, 42-43).

The VVAW and the G.I.s who were against the war made their bodies visible and charged them with countercultural, dissenting value to ward off any official post-war attempt to re-interpret them as icons of national pride and bravery: they articulated "resistance through images, tropes and poetics of mutilation in which the fragmented, dismembered, disincorporated (masculine) body signifies both the brutal incoherence of the war and the failure of dominant ideology's notion of the soldier body as an impenetrable totality" (Bibby 1996, 9). On April 18, 1971, those veterans offered one of the most effective displays of the unsettling meaning of their bodies when they marched to the Capitol, "bedecked with their nation's highest honors" (Nicosia 2001, 106-107). Although they were still young, their "eyes betray[ed] what they had only recently come from" (106-107). They marched to the Capitol not to demand their country's recognition but, quite the contrary, to reject the recognition they had already been given in the form of medals for their service and, which to them had become, in the words of Jack Smith, the first veteran to return his medals, "a symbol of dishonor, shame, and inhumanity" (quoted in Nicosia 2001, 141). These men "no longer felt they had to prove anything to anybody, although many bore a visible proof in the cane they walked with, or a missing limb, or a paralyzed body, or simply in the friends who could no longer walk beside them" (Nicosia 2001, 141).

The compelling presence of those bodies and their hold on public opinion can only be accurately gauged by evaluating the reaction of the US institutions, which will engage in a second war, this time a domestic one, to recover their credibility with the American public. According to Michael Rogin, the US institutions engaged in a strategy of "motivated forgetting"—or "amnesia" (1993, 504)—of the war in Vietnam. This 'motivated forgetting,' however, was not put into effect by silencing or denying public visibility to the cultural representations of the Vietnam War and its veterans. Indeed, the US institutions, threatened by the subversive presence of the dissenting veterans and their anti-war civilian and G.I. allies, aimed to achieve the illusion of a new meaning-giving order precisely through the spectacularization of the veterans' bodies, which had started proliferating in popular representations of the war. "Spectacle is about forgetting," continues Michael Rogin, "instead of dissolving the subject into structures or discourses, the concept of amnesia points to an identity that persists over time and that preserves a false center by burying the actual past" (1993, 508). US society was bombarded by numerous, easily forgettable representations of the past as entertainment.[5] The ultimate objective of this strategy was to prevent the actual experience of veterans from percolating into the narratives that were competing to

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[5] The clearest examples of these cultural products are films such as the *Rambo* or the *Missing in Action* series.

establish a final mainstream version of the history of the war. Instead, their experience was supplanted by that of a fictionalized identity, stable and unchanging, that would "co-opt the veterans' experience while purporting to speak on their behalf" (Bates 1996, 145); a fictionalized entity that the audience would eventually come to recognize as the "authentic" veteran of the war and that would do nothing but foster the restoration of the pre-war consensus and help unfold the interpretations of the war favored by the extant ideological state apparatus.[6]

The success of this strategy depended on making illegitimate the potential political agency of the protesting veterans' bodies. To that end, one of the most effective steps taken was the appearance of the stereotype of the Rambo-like warrior hero. According to Harry W. Haines, *Rambo* "offers a position from which to understand the veterans' postwar silencing in terms consistent with the revisionist interpretation of the war . . . *Rambo* helped rehabilitate the Vietnam veteran politically by purging him of ideological taint. Here, the veteran emerges as a usable sign of postwar consensus, serving the needs of the ideological bloc that assigns particular meanings to the war throughout an array of social institutions" (1990, 88). The veteran character John Rambo has been purged of any possible association with the political left and has been "contained, made manageable, reprocessed by a specific ideological bloc" (89).[7] His body, though scarred, is whole and complete and it stands as much as a metaphor of the conservative, revisionist post-war ideology as the fragmented body had once been a metaphor for the broken body politic. The fissureless, almost auto-regenerative body admits no contestation and masters all threats, becoming an idealized version of the nation. Thus, the lesson taught and, unfortunately, learned is that "the price of reintegration is the strategic forgetting of ideological crisis" (Haines 1990, 88). These new "state-supported American heroes . . . encourage . . . immediate audience identification, elevating a visionary ideal above chaotic, ordinary, daily existence" (Rogin 1993, 508-509), and providing a historical narrative which is a lot more comfortable than being reminded of the ideological crisis involved in, to quote poet W. D. Ehrhart:

> laugh[ing] at old men stumbling
> in the dust in frenzied terror
> to avoid our three-ton trucks . . .

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[6] The strategy of suppressing male war resistance was so successful that "in the mid-1980s when uniformed veterans gathered in protest outside of a Boston opening of *Rambo,* they were attacked by a horde of outraged teenagers. According to the teenagers screaming at the vets to go home, it was Sylvester Stallone—a real man— who was also 'a real veteran'" (Boose 1993, 596).

[7] Rambo himself makes a point of distancing himself from the hippie identity that the sheriff, on first seeing him, pins on him because of his long hair and him wearing a jacket with an American flag on it. And he does so, not by informing the sheriff of his unquestionable patriotism, but by emerging during the saga as a Green Beret hero, the "'symbol of the American spirit,' as Rambo was described in the advertisements" for the second film of the original trilogy (Hellman 1991, 149).

We have been Democracy on Zippo raids,
burning houses to the ground,
driving eager amtracks through new-sown fields . . .

We are your sons, America,
and you cannot change that.
When you awake,
we will still be here. (1989, 59)

3. THOSE WHO HAVE GONE HOME TIRED[8]

There is something I want to say
Not anything you need believe
But there is no thunder here
And the silence
Nothing forgives
(D. F. Brown)[9]

Neutralizing the distorting effect on society of those veterans who returned from
Vietnam with psychological wounds that only became visible through their difficulties
to adjust smoothly to civilian life proved to be a more complex task. The strategy most
commonly used was that of emphasizing their emotional and mental fragility and, so as
to represent them as "malcontents, liars, wackos, losers" (Swiers 1984, 198), most of the
time as also having serious drug-addiction problems and being highly prone to random
violence. Instead of analyzing the nature of their psychological and emotional problems
and trying to ascertain their causes, while, at the same time, finding ways to give them
appropriate medical care, the hospitals and clinics of the Department of Veterans Affairs
tended to neglect their responsibility by systematically casting doubt on the fact that
those psychological wounds were actually caused by exposure to traumatic events while
serving for the US Army in Vietnam. This official line asserted that the incapacity of
the veterans to adjust to being useful members of society was previous to their war
experience, thus, denying them any kind of political agency, making their complaints
and demands illegitimate and giving the Department of Veterans Affairs the legal
subterfuge to avoid treating them. The discourse of these veterans was branded with
the stigma of insanity and the only place society was ready to allot their bodies was
within the well-secluded walls of mental institutions or prisons, away from any subject
position which would allow them participation in the elaboration of the narrative about
the significance of the American War in Vietnam and the previously mentioned process

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[8] From a 1977 poem by W. D. Ehrhart.
[9] Included in Ehrhart's anthology of Vietnam War poetry, *Unaccustomed Mercy* (Ehrhart 1989, 33).

of post-war redefinition of the national identity. To paraphrase Michel Foucault, for the network of relations through which power was exercised to remain unquestioned and intact, these veterans had to be silenced and disempowered. "[P]ower and knowledge directly imply one another; . . . there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations" and by rendering the veterans speechless or branding their utterances nonsensical (Foucault [1975] 1991, 27), they were made to radically disappear from the "power-knowledge relations" precisely at the time when the cultural memory of the war was being constructed. Those who sacrificed the most were being condemned to silence and political irrelevance and denied access to the "cultural negotiation through which different stories vie for a place in history" (Sturken 1997, 1).

Fictional representations of the psychologically wounded veterans played a crucial role in spreading the notion that they were uncomfortably awkward, socially and politically useless and, in most cases, dangerous; these stereotypes contributed to the perception of real veterans, in need of psychological help after having been exposed to a traumatic war experience, as deviant selves, unusual and undesirable Americans that needed to be normalized for society to recover its homogeneity and the nostalgically missed pre-war consensus. This process of normalization imposes homogeneity at the same time that it individualizes those who are branded as different: Normalization keeps watch over the excessive and the exceptional, delimiting the outcasts who threaten the order of normalcy. There are institutions to contain these outcasts and— if possible, this is at least the idea—to redirect their course to the latitudes of the normal. Institutions will form and well-adjust the young into supple, happy subjects of normalization. Institutions will reform the abnormal who stray beyond the limits (Caputo and Yount 1993, 6).

Normalization, commonly applied to all "abnormal" members of society—with a definition of "abnormality" which varies according to the historical context in which it is used—is characterized, in the case of the treatment received in the Veterans Administration hospitals, by two factors. On the one hand, they were prescribed a disproportionate number of drugs: as Gerald Nicosia writes in *Home to War. A History of the Vietnam Veterans' Movement*:

> If Vietnam vets were seen at all, it was usually to provide them with the 'quick cure' of a bag full of pills. Whether a vet was depressed, suicidal, chronically drunk, beating his wife, suffering from severe headaches, insomnia, nightmares, night sweats, and attacks of paranoia, or simply unable to hold down a job or to care about the physical circumstances of his life, he was handed a junkie's fortune in tranquilizers, with plenty of renewals. (2001, 176)

On the other, each patient was individualized as an exceptional case whose experience could not be used to understand or relate to another veteran's. The therapy given would

concentrate on evaluating the life of the soldier before the war in an effort to pin the responsibility for his present ailment on his own original dysfunctional nature and, in no case, on the traumatic war experience. "By wanting to know everything, all about the childhood, the personal history, the fantasies of the patient/in-mate/believer, the 'subject' is produced. And power produces its subjects in an unlimited, interminable subjectification, by exceedingly detailed personal dossiers, elaborate records of the individual life and personal history" and the subjects thus created conveniently freed the US institutions from any responsibility and re-cleaned their good name (Caputo and Yount 1993, 6), while condemning the traumatized individual to remorse, self-guilt and social exclusion.

Symptomatic of the efforts of the establishment to dodge responsibility are the difficulties people like Chaim Shatan and Sarah Paley—two of the most successful therapists for Vietnam veterans and whose work I will refer to later—had in getting the American Psychiatric Association (APA) to accept the inclusion of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in the third edition of APA's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM III). According to Matthew J. Friedman, the main objection the APA had against the inclusion was that, in the definition of PTSD, "the etiological agent was outside the individual him or herself (i.e., the traumatic event) rather than an inherent individual weakness" (2007, 1). The acceptance of that premise would allow for an interpretation of the veterans' psychological problems that identified combat experience as the etiological agent and, therefore, force the Veterans Administration to defray the expenses of any treatment these men might need. This clashed with the opinion of the majority of the members of APA at the time who were inclined to believe that, in the words of psychologist Lee Robbins, "these guys were all character disorders. They came from rotten backgrounds. They were going to be malcontent and dysfunctional anyway. Vietnam just probably made them worse, but Vietnam is not the cause of their problems. They're alcoholic and drug addicts" (quoted in Nicosia 2001, 205).

This process of subjectification, based on an insistence on the particularity of patients and not on the commonality of their war experience, will prove a crucial aspect of the way veterans of the American War in Vietnam have been represented as unstable psyches. The Vietnam Veteran became a marketable villain for an ever-growing number of Hollywood films and television series—almost weekly, Kojak and Ironside had to face crazed, violent Vietnam veterans armed and ready to kill. This reiteration made the association of the Vietnam veteran with violence and his identification as a threat to the social fabric inevitable, which, in turn, made it natural for the audience to desire their being arrested by the forces of law and order and confined in prisons or institutionalized. Interestingly, if veterans ever managed to adjust, it was only through the repurposing of their violence for social use, as in the case of the characters in *The A-Team* or even of Thomas Magnum in *Magnum P.I.* and James "Sonny" Crockett, the undercover cop, in *Miami Vice*. These are all clear

examples of a palpable yearning for a cultural reconciliation which, symptomatically, can only be achieved through resorting back to the exercise of violence which generated the conditions for the traumatic event in the first place (Doherty 1991, 255). The main character in *Miami Vice* is, by no coincidence, named after David Crockett, "the violent, garrulous, slaughter-loving hunter-buffoon" who became a national hero "by defining national aspiration in terms of so many bears destroyed, so much land preempted, so many trees hacked down, so many Indians and Mexicans dead in the dust" (Slotkin 1973, 308); the association of the main character in *Magnum P.I.* with the tool of his trade speaks for itself.[10] And the members of the A-team remain "honorable" social outcasts persecuted by the army, very much calling to mind the bands of outlaws of the Wild West who operated outside the law while still obeying a strict moral code. The redeemed veteran embodies anew "the 'moral truth' of the frontier experience . . . its exemplification of the principle that violence and savage war were the necessary instruments of American progress" (Slotkin 1993, 171). By the end of the twentieth century, in the United States, however, the moral and legal conditions of the Wild West no longer applied and only these traumatized psyches were permitted to use a kind and degree of violence that, in the hands of police officials, would have been condemned by public opinion; and that is what allows these veterans to reenter the social fabric, albeit in an isolated position.

The representation of veterans as "abnormal" citizens who were, for reasons that predated their exposure to the war experience, incapable of reintegrating as useful, unthreatening members of society made each patient a unique case and contributed to diverting attention from the common plight of these men. This treatment of the veterans was substantially at odds with the work being conducted in the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) offices, where, led by psychoanalyst Chaim Shatan, a group of therapists participated in an initiative which emerged from the veterans' need to talk about their war experiences: the "rap groups" or group therapy sessions. The premises on which their work was based are brilliantly summarized in a paper written by Shatan in 1973 under the title "The Grief of Soldiers: Vietnam Combat Veterans' Self-Help Movement." In it, Shatan first establishes the main reason why this alternative therapeutic practice was needed. He challenges the official claim that the number of psychiatric casualties among Vietnam veterans was low by stating that the "harvest of news [which] contains its quota of hijackings, armed robberies, murders, and suicides involving Vietnam veterans" speaks for itself (1973, 641). He also warns his readers against the perverse structure by which this criminal or self-destructive behavior among veterans, which was not interpreted by the establishment

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[10] "[While it is] a trite saying that 'the pen is mightier than the sword,' it is equally true that the bullet is the pioneer of civilization, for it has gone hand in hand with the axe that cleared the forest, and with the family Bible and school book. Deadly as has been its mission in one sense, it has been merciful in another; for without the rifle ball we of America would not be to-day in the possession of a free and united country, and mighty in our strength" ("Buffalo Bill's Wild West" program, 1886 and 1893, quoted in Slotkin 1993, 171).

as symptomatic of these veterans needing help, would later be used to stigmatize and vilify them. In spite of the fact that the admission of the existence of their crimes should have been tantamount to officially assuming they needed therapy, it, ironically, ended up providing the argument against the veterans' corporate identity and need for help.

As a consequence, many vets distrusted not only standard psychiatric services but also the private offices of former combat psychiatrists, themselves VVAW members. Rap sessions filled an unmet need and gathered together veterans of all political persuasions and even some active-duty G.I.s. These successful rap groups evolved from two different but equally failed approaches: those where "therapists who had no actual survival experience themselves attempted to run them as traditional therapy groups. These groups failed when survivors resisted being 'treated' . . . [and those groups] created by the survivors themselves without therapist involvement. Intensely cathartic, they lacked therapeutic guidance and formal attention to group process" (Russell Smith 1985, 167-168). The VVAW rap groups merged both models and "created a forum to constructively address the distress they all saw in themselves and other veterans" (1985, 168). These rap group sessions provided participants with mutual support from others who had gone through similar traumatic experiences and they encouraged each other to begin confronting their traumas. In these sessions, the main emotional problems dealt with were on the one hand, the terror and grief felt as a direct consequence of their combat experience and on the other, the guilt and rage which the process of trying to reintegrate into a new civilian identity awoke in them. Probably, the most outstanding feature of this practice was that the therapist was to some extent just one more member of the group and got emotionally involved with the participants. Therapists and veterans developed an intense bond as the latter saw the therapists in the group as resource people, not as figures of authority and that generated a unique feeling of coherence. According to Shatan, "any tendencies to endow us [the therapists] with an authoritative mantle have been short-lived, in spite of—or, perhaps, because of—their previous military experience. They have had enough of chains of command" (1973, 642-643). The rap sessions became, in their reevaluation of the role of authority, a way to question the traditional role of the therapist and an example of a more democratic involvement of the patients with their own therapy, providing, in turn, a hint of their desire for more democratic social institutions: "Many veterans feel that officialdom has no place in this self-help movement, not even to fund it" wrote Shatan (1973, 649).

Another striking conclusion reached by Shatan and his team was that "in the face of such amorphous combat,[11] only the most intense ideological commitment can supply a psychic bulwark" (1973, 645).[12] The "talking cure" alone, Shatan states, is

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[11] Cf. Michael Bibby, ed., *The Vietnam War and Postmodernity* (1999).
[12] Cf. P. Gillingham, *Wasted Men; the Reality of the Vietnam Veteran* (1972). Report of Veterans World Project.

worthless. Verbalizing grief and pain allowed the veteran to start "bear[ing] witness to a truth that nonetheless continues to escape him, a truth that is, essentially *not available* to its own speaker" (Felman and Laub 1992, 15). During the rap sessions, however, their testimony was addressed to others, the witnesses, who would then "testif[y] to what has been said *through* him. Because the witness has said 'here I am' before the other" (3), he has established with the person giving testimony a bond of co-responsibility and emotional support which enables the speaker to tentatively look for the words which will hopefully bring order and help to find meaning in the traumatic memory. That, however, did not suffice to help veterans in the transition towards regaining a useful social life.

To the question "[i]f history has clinical dimensions, how can testimony *intervene*, pragmatically and efficaciously, at once historically (politically) *and* clinically?" (Felman and Laub 1992, 9), Shatan and his team had provided a tentative answer: "active participation in the public arena, active opposition to the very war policies they helped carry out, was essential. . . . To be effective, this counter-VA [Veterans Administration] must also be free to undertake relevant social and political action in opposition to the power structure responsible for the Vietnam War, and for its unpinnings" (1973, 649). As Ron Kovic explains so poignantly in *Born on the Fourth of July*, in activism lies recovery:

> I told Skip that I [Kovic] was never going to be the same. The demonstration had stirred something in my mind that would be there from now on. It was so very different from boot camp and fighting in the war. There was a togetherness, just as there had been in Vietnam, but it was a togetherness of a different kind of people and for a much different reason. In the war we were killing and maiming people. In Washington on that Saturday afternoon in May we were trying to heal them and set them free. ([1976] 1995, 107-108)

This kind of activism implies a refashioning of the US institutions and even national identity: "What I really wanted to do was to go on speaking out . . . I honestly believed people would listen to me because of who I was, a wounded American veteran. *They would have to listen*" ([1976] 1995, 110-114, italics added).

The effort towards personal recovery is intertwined with the desire to give testimony, and through that testimony take part in a project of national recovery; individual therapy is understood as a tool for communal therapy. Ron Kovic wised up to that fact after he met a group of veterans to share his experiences: "We were men who had gone to war. Each of us had his story to tell, his own nightmare. Each of us had been made cold by this thing. We wore ribbons and uniforms. We talked of death and atrocity to each other with unaccustomed gentleness" ([1976] 1995, 112); a rap group that center-stages the importance of a therapy based on language, verbalization and narration which empowers G.I.s to enter the cultural war over the meaning of the war.

4. Conclusions

The description of the veteran from the American War in Vietnam that emerges from Chaim Shatan's recounting of his work as a therapist has nothing to do with the representations of the veteran as abnormal psycho or useless amputee, so common in the films and TV series of the eighties and nineties. Confronted by the veterans' thrust into politics, the institutions responded by denying them their potential as political agents, either by describing them as useless due to their wounds or as dangerous because of a mental or emotional disorder for which the authorities did not accept responsibility. The establishment "could never conceive of the therapeutic implications of Vietnam veterans publishing an anthology of war poems (proceeds going to a Quaker rehabilitation center in South Vietnam and the rebuilding of Hanoi's foremost hospital), preparing a book of prose, or founding their own newspaper" (Shatan 1973, 649-650); they could not face the idea of therapy and politics going hand in hand.

Unfortunately, academic studies of the literature produced by Vietnam veterans, instead of problematizing the said divergence between the reality of the veterans and their cultural representation, have, by and large, been complicit in the efforts made by the hegemonic discourses to deprive veterans of political agency by analyzing their work strictly as an exercise of self-healing therapy. An example of this is to be found in the otherwise brilliant study of Tim O'Brien's fiction by Mark Heberle (2001). Heberle contends, speaking of *Going After Cacciato* (1978), that

> O'Brien's own refabulating of the war is mimicked—or epitomized—by his fictional double, Paul Berlin, who tries to deal with the traumatic facts of his war by dreaming of a scenario that will allow him to escape it. In the end, the dream cannot escape or change reality, but the creation is at least imaginatively redemptive for him. The same might be said for the book as a whole, a fictional revisiting of the site of O'Brien's own traumatization that forever validated his authority as a writer. (Heberle 2001, 108)

This reading of the novel establishes its meaning as the process of the therapeutic recovery of its author after the war, a sort of fictionalized psychoanalytic therapy and, as such, these therapies are, by definition, a personal, subjective process with no points of contact with the larger context of the plight of the veterans against the war. However legitimate this reading of the work of O'Brien might be, it has the undesirable side effect of silencing another of the forces that shape his fiction, that is, the author's open criticism and rejection of the war, best summarized by O'Brien himself: "I was a coward. I went to war" (1991, 63).

Lest we forget the force of antimilitarism among both active-duty G.I.s and veterans of the American War in Vietnam, we will have to keep returning to the work of people who, like Chaim Shatan and Ron Kovic, remind us of the therapeutic value—to both the individual soldier and the nation at large—of dissent and of resistance to

irrational undemocratic authority. As Joseph Urgo, an early leader of VVAW, says when describing the effects of the testimonies of veterans in the *Winter Soldier Investigation*:[13]

> [L]istening to the testimonies [of the veterans accusing the US military of crimes against humanity] had a tremendous impact on me in helping me grasp how criminal what the United States had done in Vietnam [*sic*] . . . the scope of it . . . in a way that I'd not understood before . . . It actually helped prepare me to grapple with trying to understand what was behind this, you know, led me to, like, try to, you know, get into researching what imperialism was, what's the system that gives rise to this. That was one of the stepping stones in the process. (Zeiger 2006)

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[13] The *Winter Soldier Investigation* was a fake trial in which war veterans accused the US Army and government of having committed crimes against humanity in Vietnam. Al Hubbard—executive secretary for VVAW—declares that, during the sessions: "more than one hundred veterans and sixteen civilians gave first hand testimony to war crimes which they had either committed or witnessed," with the intention of establishing the political responsibilities that should derive from those crimes: "the crimes against humanity, the war itself, might not have occurred if we, all of us, had not been brought up in a country permeated with racism, obsessed with communism, and convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt that we are good and most other countries are inherently evil" (VVAW 1972, xiii-xiv).

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Cristina Alsina Rísquez teaches twentieth century US literature at the University of Barcelona, where she is a Serra Hunter fellow. She is a member of the research group "Dona i literatura" at the same University. She co-directs the Journal *Lectora: revista de dones i textualitat* and has just co-edited the book *Innocence and Loss: Representations of War and National Identity in the Unites States*.

Address: Departament de Filologia Anglesa i Alemanya. Facultat de Filologia. Gran Via de les Corts Catalanes, 585. 08007, Barcelona, Spain. Tel.: +34 934035688.