

Brenda M. Boyle, ed. 2015. *The Vietnam War. Topics in Contemporary North American Literature*. London and New York: Bloomsbury. xvi + 205 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4725-1204-8.

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The 2003 invasion of Iraq fueled yet another surge of interest in the US war in Viet Nam. The ambition of Brenda M. Boyle's collection is, luckily, to be more than yet another volume that capitalizes on this favorable wind for publication. Rather, it pays attention to the cultural and political significance of the omissions in the representation of the Viet Nam war thus far. Broadening the literary canon by not privileging the voices of the US veterans over those of the non-combatants, this work is transnational in nature as it includes Vietnamese voices—Southerners, Northerners and Viet Cong—as well as advocating a theoretical approach to the texts which corrects the distorting tendency towards referentiality in the field. In this collection novels are analyzed not as sources of documentary information, but as fictional artifacts best addressed from other forms of textuality. This approach is to be celebrated.

*The Vietnam War. Topics in Contemporary North American Literature* belongs to the series Bloomsbury Topics in Contemporary North American Literature, conceived as a collection of useful teaching tools. Boyle's contribution most certainly meets this objective, as evidenced by the inclusion of a very useful "Further reading" section and a revealing chronology. Writing a chronology of the American War in Viet Nam is a tricky job. Forty years ago, in *Dispatches*, Michael Herr declared it impossible to "date the doom" (1979, 46). For some, it started in 1954, with Viet Nam's declaration of independence from France. Others track it all the way back to World War II, with the Japanese invasion of Vichy France's Indochina. For yet others, it took hold in 1961 with Kennedy's expansion of military aid to President Ngo Dinh Diem. Officially, the war began in 1965, after the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. But culturally, Herr argues: "[we] might as well lay it on the proto-Gringos who found the New England woods too raw and empty for their peace and filled them up with their own imported devils" (46). Boyle frames the chronology using the following three dates: 1897, when "France makes itself the government of the Indochina Union" (viii); 1917, when President Wilson talks about the right of self-determination of all nations; and 1919, when Ho Chi Minh petitions for Vietnamese independence. Her text, therefore, rests on a

postcolonial scaffold befitting a collection that contributes to increasing the presence of Vietnamese voices in the literary canon of the American War in Viet Nam. The volume also includes a clarifying introduction that maps both the nature and history of the field. In her preview of the essays themselves, Boyle also provides the reader with a first approach to the most pervasive tropes in the fiction stemming from the experience of the war, and to the most cogent debates in the academic response to the said fiction.

The volume gathers together seven essays that ably tackle some of these debates. Central to the collection are articles continuing the important work of making visible Vietnamese contributions to the representation of the war, work started by collections of fiction such as *Once Upon a Dream... The Vietnamese-American Experience* (De Tran, Lam and Hai Dai Nguyen 1995), *The Other Side of Heaven: Post-War Fiction by Vietnamese & American Writers* (Karlin, Le Minh Khue and Truong Vu 1995) and *Watermark: Vietnamese American Poetry & Prose* (Tran, Truong and Luu Truong Khoi 1998) and which reverberates in Christian Appy's extraordinary oral history *Patriots. The Vietnam War Remembered from all Sides* (2003). Michele Janette's piece on three novels by two North Vietnamese "insiders-turned-dissidents" (49)—Duong Thu Huong's *Paradise of the Blind* (1988) and *Novel Without a Name* (1995) and Bao Ninh's *The Sorrow of War* (1990)—is a much needed attempt to supersede the tendency to include Vietnamese voices only as a politically correct exercise in compromise. Instead, Janette analyzes these voices for their capacity to problematize the rather simplistic representations of Viet Nam's history, socio-political complexities and peoples which are found in most US fiction about the war. According to Janette, the texts do not complement but rather challenge the American literary canon, while at the same time offering a sharp criticism of contemporary North Viet Nam through their reassessment of its national history. Janette is cautious enough to point out that the dissent voiced by Duong and Bao is not comparable to that of South Viet Nam or to the anti-war dissent in the United States. As North Vietnamese dissidents, their accounts of the war are partial in their own ways and, significantly, they are valued by a Western readership more willing to listen to traitors to the communist regime of North Viet Nam than to representatives of the victorious North. Janette's effort to view the conflict from a transnational perspective on the processes of decolonization and within the larger framework of the Cold War is also one of the most praiseworthy aspects of the whole volume. The approach aligns with attempts to redefine American Studies so as to transform it into the transnational, comparativist and trans-disciplinary field imagined by the New Americanists, including Shelley Fisher Fishkin (2005), Donald E. Pease (2011) and John Carlos Rowe (2012).

In the same vein, Isabelle Thuy Pelaud's text on le thi diem thuy combines the volume's transnational perspective with another of the theoretical tools favored by the collection: Gender Studies (95-114). Thuy Pelaud analyzes how le thi diem thuy's texts explore the role censorship played in the creation of a recognizable identity for herself as a Vietnamese American writer. Thuy Pelaud also explores how le, as a Vietnamese woman refugee, has to fight against three intersecting and overbearing forces: the need

to honor family and respect tradition, the male gaze that exoticizes and orientalizes her, and the demand by mainstream readership that she should fictionalize her experience as a refugee in ways that are accommodating to the US's guilty conscience. The collection closes with another text that takes a Gender Studies perspective in which Boyle considers three twenty-first-century novels (159-184): Denis Johnson's *Tree of Smoke* (2007), Karl Marlantes's *Matterhorn* (2010), and Tatjana Solis's *The Lotus Eaters* (2010). Boyle's analysis concentrates on how the novels "confront practices of masculinities in contemporary American war culture" (165), leading her to the conclusion that, in the post 9/11 US of the Patriot Act, the Viet Nam War is being cynically re-written to highlight the uplifting outcome of the war for Americans—particularly male—who, despite being broken by the experience, managed to heal and become stronger as individuals and as citizens.

One of the guiding principles of this volume, what we might call the vietnamization of Viet Nam War Studies, also brings with it an interrogation of the notion of victimhood, which has traditionally been associated with anguished, suffering American soldiers. This reconsideration of victimhood and guilt is fruitfully and innovatively engaged from the theoretical framework of Trauma Studies. However, this is also one of the few aspects of the collection that could be deemed inconsistent: most of the essays on trauma concentrate on US literature, emphasizing yet again the narcissistic discourse of American victimization. That said, unquestionably, the way Mason, O'Brien or Herr are read from Trauma Studies is a groundbreaking contribution. Hopefully, now that the foundations have been laid, other work will follow which will analyze the traumatic experiences of the Vietnamese combatants—in both armies—as well as those of the refugees. That, in turn, will ward off the discourses of American exceptionalism that permeate US representations of the war and will help challenge the naturalization of the US presence in Viet Nam.

Mark Heberle's piece on *Dispatches* (1977) concentrates on how Herr's post-traumatic visitations (29) shape the narration and distance it from any allegedly objective, officially sanctioned representation of the events (27-46). According to Heberle, the text's conjunction of New Journalism and traumatic memory blurs the distinction between reporting and fiction and fosters the idea that to map the Viet Nam War authentically, one must revert to subjectivity and fiction. Herr's account of the war is tinged with the reporter's ethical unease about his being able to leave the war behind at any minute and with his need to make visible the overpowering presence of death, which was so often minimized or left out in official reporting. Joanna Price, in turn, reads Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country* (1985) as a novel that explores ethical response to collective grief (71-94). The two main characters, Emmett and Sam, have to face the burden of PTSD and post-memory respectively and thus embody the national difficulties in coping with the Viet Nam War. According to Price, these two characters learn that their emotional survival comes from being "'implicated' in the lives of others" (93), meaning that Mason's novel needs to be read as an invitation to understand history relationally and responsibly.

Susan Farrell's chapter on Tim O'Brien adds to a much-needed revision of his work that avoids ascribing meaning and worth to it only inasmuch as it conveys some sort of factual truth (115-136). Instead, Farrell addresses it from the expressly theoretical standpoint of political philosophy and ethics and justifies her choice by pointing out that O'Brien himself asserts that literature "must entail the practice of 'moral philosophy'" understood as a "process of rigorous and careful thought about values" (quoted on page 117; emphasis in the original). Besides, O'Brien's fiction addresses the philosophical conundrum of how to behave ethically in a war one considers unjust. Farrell engages in a very interesting description of the complex images of the domestic in O'Brien's work: while the thought of home allows soldiers to cling to a world not haunted by the ugliness and moral depravation of the war, we are also reminded, in an ethical Gordian knot, that the ideological and social nature of the very domestic bliss they idealize is the origin and the justifier of the war from which they are trying to escape.

Stacey Pebbles contributes a chapter on Larry Heinemann's *Paco's Story* (1987), an unjustifiably neglected novel despite having bested Toni Morrison's *Beloved* to win the Pulitzer Prize in 1987. Pebbles remarks on the numerous points of comparison between these two novels (137-158): they both deal with traumatic experiences perpetrated by a US institution, emphasize oral storytelling as testimony, stress the legacy of not only psychological but also bodily pain, and include main characters who are both perpetrators and victims. In both texts, the tension of this contradiction generates a ghost-like presence that somehow stands for these hurt and hurting bodies. Heinemann's novel, however, takes a much bleaker stand than Morrison's. In it, community—the so often romanticized male community of brothers-in-arms and the nation they represent—is singled out as the originator of the horror it endures (148) and it offers no consolation; it only contributes to the fragmentation of a subject for whom there is no possible healing.

All in all, the volume is a very useful collection for graduate students, for those researchers who have recently developed an interest in the ever-growing body of work on the representations of the Viet Nam War, and for those having specialized in the field, who will find new perspectives which prove that we are far from having exhausted it.

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