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Sam Hughes as a Second Generation Trauma Victim in Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country*

Bobbie Ann Mason in her 1985 novel *In Country* interjects a woman's perspective in the largely male-dominated subgenre known as Vietnam War literature. She demonstrates how the trauma of war can be transferred onto those who did not participate in the war itself, particularly through the novel's protagonist Samantha Hughes. Sam, the product of a Vietnam War soldier, carries the traumatic legacy of the war with her in her quest to find herself. Mostly, she tries to construct her identity by engaging in her family's history – that of her deceased father and her uncle Emmett who she now lives with. Notably, Sam is a seventeen year old woman, and thus shows how war's trauma transverses boundaries of gender and generational experience. In essence, through her journey to establish her identity she reveals that the loss of the war affects every American, for “all the names in America have been used to decorate” the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (Mason 245). However, the *trauma* of the event passes on to a select few like Sam, rendering her psychologically a product of the war, its inheritor. In order to locate her identity in this historical moment she must masculinize herself to fit into the war's and the wall's rhetoric. Thus, history and how it is memorialized becomes masculinized and in order to allow her fragile identity to fit into this framework, she too must rewrite her female body to incorporate herself into the war, for she needs her community to understand that even as a female she is also a part of the war's legacy. For this revelation to come to fruition in her small hometown of Hopewell, Kentucky, she must prove herself masculine enough to be integrated within the war's framework in a post-Vietnam, 1980s America.

In the boom of Vietnam War texts that were marketed and sold in the 1980s, Susan Jeffords in her monograph *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and The Vietnam War* contends that there is a concerted effort to remasculinize the American soldier. Since the soldier often rotated back to the World¹ to a hostile public, the plethora of texts that came out of this period – literature, film, television shows, and so forth – have attempted to rectify his standing in the public sphere. Rather than blaming the soldier for failures abroad, the American public sought to chastise the government and government officials, who, for Jeffords, come to represent the feminine (144). By rewriting the veteran as victim rather than perpetrator, he comes to “revive[]” “American manhood” (116), which only serves to place blame on the feminine for the loss of the war, represented by “characteristics of weakness, passivity, nonaggression, and negotiation” (160). This bears significant implications for Jeffords because “[b]y reaffirming masculinity and thereby the relations of dominance it embodies, other relations of dominance are reinforced as well and the system of patriarchy as a whole is supported” (xiii). It is this “system of patriarchy” in which Sam must negotiate how she fits into the world of the Vietnam War veteran/victim as she comes of age throughout the novel.

The narrative of the novel is dissected into two parts. The first and third sections relate the story of how Sam, Emmett, and Mamaw, her father’s mother who by Sam’s own admission she barely knows, travel from Hopewell, Kentucky to Washington D.C. to visit the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The second section dominates most of the narrative, however, and relates the story of how Sam came to the conclusion that she needs to visit the memorial in order to establish her identity as a product of the Vietnam War. Since her father quickly married her mother before he was shipped off to war and died while in country, Sam never knew him apart from his Vietnam experience. This search for who her father was drives most of her actions throughout the book, and his identity, the remembrances of him, is collapsed into the war that claimed his life. Overall, *In Country* is a story about a young woman trying to locate her family’s roots in order to establish her identity. That familial history, she finds, is intertwined with political history and the various tragedies produced by the Vietnam War. Individual men like her father, uncle, and others in her small-town community who fought in Vietnam embody those tragedies. Eventually, that trauma writes itself onto Sam and she carries the burden of Vietnam by not only being surrounded by these men, but also by assuming the trauma of their experiences as her own.

Sandra Bonilla Durham argues that *In Country* is structured around two quests: one to visit the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, which is spurned by the second

quest where Sam goes “both literally and figuratively into the wilderness, or ‘in country,’ to test her ability to survive” (46). By the completion of the final quest to the memorial, Sam realizes that “all Americans are war casualties and are, in that way, united” (52). For Durham, this realization prepares Sam for a “promising future” (52). Similarly, June Dwyer reads the novel and its culminating voyage to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial as a way to reconcile the American family. On the other hand, Ellen A. Blais reads the moment in which Sam finds her own name on the memorial as an experience of “successful fusion of the contradictions within her of male and female...beyond the contradictions of victory and defeat, life and death” (116). This realization that Sam also constitutes the fabric of atrocity blurs the boundaries of masculinity and femininity for Blais. Mark S. Graybill takes his discussion of feminism in the text a different route, however. He argues that by interspersing simulacra with the feminist *Bildungsroman*, Mason exposes the vicissitudes of gender and genre in her text.

Moving away from discussions of reconciliation, I contend that Mason’s novel is one about the infliction and the reliving of trauma. Typically when authors discuss the transference of trauma, they do so in conjunction with the Holocaust and how its survivors have passed that trauma onto subsequent generations. For example, Marita Grimwood’s text *Holocaust Literature of the Second Generation* does such work. Taking a broad view of the term “second generation,” she encompasses “a more general sense of how the events of the Holocaust have shaped the consciousness of later generations and communities...Many are children or grandchildren of survivors, while still others have grown up in close proximity to survivors” (3). She also explains that “children of survivors tend to address the issue of growing up with the profound sense that their parents’ experiences are inescapable and somehow their own” (8). While authors like Grimwood suggest that trauma is transferable to later generations in her discussion of Holocaust literature, I would like to extend that theory and propose that the trauma experienced by Vietnam War soldiers is also transferable. Mason’s work fits this framework, for as Philip D. Beidler admits, Mason along with Robert Olen Butler have produced “a new, literal second-generation literature of Vietnam” (52). Like Grimwood’s formulation, Sam, too, grows up in close proximity to a survivor of the Vietnam War, her uncle Emmett. Sam even comments that the “stress of the Vietnam War...was her inheritance” (89).

Similar to my motives, Lisa Hinrichsen examines Mason’s text through certain theoretical traumatic frameworks. She argues that “the novel investigates the belated accounting of trauma” and situates this trauma in community history and the traumatic family (237). This kind of trauma that begins with the individual and

extends to imaginings of the American nation suggests that Sam functions as an American implication in the nation's "participation in the work of an empire" (238). As Hinrichsen explains:

In Country interrogates the role memorialization plays in repressing the truth of the past and powerfully raises questions of both southern and national memorial practices that prevent the violence that happens elsewhere from ever fully being brought home, showing how even the most *average* citizens are part of complex systems of historical remembrance, consumption, and erasure. (234-5, emphasis mine)

By not naming the kind of trauma that Sam experiences as second generation trauma as I do, Hinrichsen investigates national and global interpretations and consequences of trauma. I, on the other hand, look at how trauma is transcribed onto the second generation individual, Sam, for even Sam admits that the war "had *everything* to do with me" (71, emphasis original). The trauma that transpires as a result of the war resides within her, the individual.

To frame my discussion as to how Sam engages in and deals with her trauma, I rely on Dominick LaCapra's definitions of "acting out" and "working through." These two terms are distinct, yet interrelated, processes, ones that allow the victim to cope with his/her trauma. He defines acting out as "related to...the repetition compulsion – the tendency to repeat something compulsively" (142). When acting out trauma, victims immerse themselves in the past, "as if one were still fully in the past, with no distance from it" (142-3). On the other hand, working through is a "desirable process," one in which "the person tries to gain critical distance on a problem and to distinguish between past, present, and future" (143). Although these appear to be separate engagements with one's trauma, he suggests that the process of acting out is a repetitive one, whereas "[w]orking through involves repetition with significant difference...[It] is not a linear, teleological, or straightforward developmental...process either for the individual or for the collectivity. It requires going back to problems, working them over, and perhaps transforming the understanding of them" (148). Throughout the novel we can see how Sam's investigative enterprises demonstrate how acting out is indeed a progressive model for working through. Without investigating her father's history through exhaustive modes – her repetition compulsion in Cathy Caruth's sense of the term – she would never be propelled to visit the Vietnam Veterans Memorial where she eventually works through her trauma.

In order to understand Sam one must first look to her uncle Emmett, for certain parallels exist between these two characters. Namely, Emmett feels he cannot reintegrate himself into his hometown post-war. Hopewell has its own notions about veterans as exemplified in the rumors that circulate about Emmett specifically: “There were a lot of stories floating around about Emmett. Emmett was the leading dope dealer in town. Emmett slept with his niece. Emmett lived off his sister. Emmett seduced high school girls. He had killed babies in Vietnam” (31). Despite the fact that he “was popular” (31), the townspeople still cast Emmett as the stereotypically socially dangerous veteran, a damaged deviant. He is to be watched carefully and regarded with a suspicious eye.

Similar to her uncle Emmett, Sam also does not fit into the fabric of her community for several reasons, which marks her as a citizen who is not “average” (Hinrichsen 235). First, her home life is quite different from the other teenagers that go to school with her. She lives with her uncle Emmett, rather than her mother, so she could finish high school in her hometown. Further, her father died while serving in Vietnam. Thus, she has been raised in a single-parent family and in a masculine household. This distinction differentiates Sam from the rest of the high-schoolers in Hopewell, even her best friend, Dawn.

Unlike most girls Sam’s age, including Dawn, she does not want to get married and start a family at a young age. Once Dawn becomes pregnant with her boyfriend’s child, Sam voices her dismay at how pregnancy confines women to small towns like hers. Reflecting on Dawn’s condition, Sam thinks, “It was *tragic* that Dawn hadn’t taken the pill. Sam thought about how it used to be that getting pregnant when you weren’t married ruined your life because of the disgrace; now it just ruined your life, and nobody cared enough for it to be a disgrace” (103, emphasis mine). Being entrapped in the cycle of bearing children and getting married is something that Sam finds “tragic” and cannot fathom herself doing. However, she finds that her boyfriend Lonnie pressures her into the same role, that of becoming wife and mother. As Durham argues, Lonnie “push[es] her toward marriage [and] she resists because her friend Dawn’s pregnancy makes Sam realize how easily women get stuck in their roles” (48). In order to escape this entrapment, she even suggests that Dawn get an abortion because “[h]aving kids is what everybody does. It doesn’t take any special talent” (177). She even equates Dawn’s pregnancy to “some stupid surprise, like sniper fire” (184). Sam feels that getting married and having children is a way for small towns like Hopewell to trap young women into a cycle of subjection, one that inhibits the actualization of women’s potential. As Blais verifies in her reading

of the novel, Sam “rejects the routes of early marriage and pregnancy, which her friend Dawn takes” (107).

To return to Sam’s immediate family, another aspect that marks her divergence from the cultural norm is her father, Dwayne Hughes. Although he is partially exempt from the negative stigma that follows this war’s veterans because he died in country, his memory is still a reminder of the war America lost. Remembrances of him are filled with a life that could-have-been. While his mother romanticizes her son and claims that “he was the best boy!” (195), Sam can only think of the negative possibilities of having grown up with him. During dinner at Mamaw’s, Sam “squinted her eyes and tried to see him at the table with them. He would be a grown man, like Tom. He wouldn’t be like Tom, though, living in a garage apartment. He’d be discussing blue mold and whether to take risks on wheat prices...Sam would be jiggling a baby on her knee, like [her aunt] Donna” (194-5). Had Dwayne lived, Sam would be stuck in the mundane life of a farmer’s daughter and ultimately imprisoned in the cycle of love and marriage that claims so many women victims in small towns. His imagined future would eventually be detrimental to Sam. To the outside world however, his death represents all that was wrong with Vietnam. That aberration in American history, its one “rotten apple” (Ringnalda viii),² claims the lives of innocent participants – simple farmers like Dwayne Hughes. Since a figure like Dwayne is Sam’s father, her immediate family also marks how she is different than the other high-schoolers of her town.

She seeks to understand her familial history by examining the history of the Vietnam War because this event defines her father. Even her mother admits that aside from the war, there is nothing about him “to tell” (167). Therefore, to understand the war, she immerses herself in the war’s history and relics. She tries to assimilate herself into groups comprised by Vietnam veterans. When she first walks into the dance designed to commemorate Hopewell’s veterans’ Allen Wilkins greets her at the door and says to her, “You be good now, Sam...The law’s liable to get after us for entertaining minors,” denoting her age difference from the rest of the attendees. To this remark, she responds, “Don’t I belong here?... My daddy was in the war” (109). By referencing her father, she not only proposes that she belongs to this group, but also reminds Allen that her ties to the war may be just as legitimate and intimate as his own. For Sam, her father is the Vietnam War, and in order to understand her familial roots, she must turn to historical explanations and social gatherings to get a more complete picture of him. However, Pete, another veteran, suggests that she does not belong in this group. He tells her to “Stop thinking about Vietnam, Sambo. You don’t know how it was, and you

never will. There is no way you can ever understand. So just forget it. Unless you've been humping the boonies, you don't know" (136). But, as Harriet Pollack argues, that is what the book is about: "the search for history and about its unknowability" (101). Sam must thoroughly research the history of the Vietnam War in order to understand her father and therefore herself.

And "humping the boonies" is what she will do, but not before learning about Vietnam in any way she can beforehand. In order to immerse herself in the Vietnam experience, she begins by reading historical texts about the conflict. One day she joins Emmett and his close veteran friends for breakfast at the local McDonald's. When she enters their conversation about Agent Orange, Tom Hudson wonders how she knows so much about the war. Emmett answers, "Sam's got Nam on the brain...She's been reading a bunch of history books and pestering me" (48). However, these texts do not satiate her longing to understand. "The books didn't say what it was like to be at war over there. The books didn't even have pictures," Sam laments (48). Without literary or photographic detail, Sam finds that she has a difficult time imagining the war, and thus imagining her father.

Along with casually interviewing Emmett and his friends, she also researches media reports and struggles to remember those she had seen when she was a young child. When she was "eight or nine" she saw a report filmed "during the fall of Saigon, in 1975" (51). The television newscast "showed some people walking along a road with bundles on their backs. Some were carrying babies in their arms...The landscape was believable – a hill in the distance, a paved road with narrow dirt shoulders, a field with something green planted in rows...For the first time, Vietnam was an actual place" (51). Although she clings to this memory so she can envision the land, she later finds her mental pictures fleeting. She admits to Emmett, "I can't really see it...All I can see in my mind is picture postcards. It doesn't seem real. I can't believe it was really real" (95). Due to the fallibility of memory, the once "believable" becomes unbelievable. Thus, in order to gain a more solidified picture of her father, she turns to official documents, thinking that if she could see "her parents' wedding license, birth certificates, death certificates" then she would have "official proof[] that she was who she was," but she quickly dismisses this as a "silly thought" (96).

As much as she has learned from media, historical texts, and "official" documents, she sees that her best chance for understanding what the war (and therefore her father) was like is to engage in personal interviews, or hearing testimony from those who were there. Dori Laub argues that there are three distinct levels of witnessing: "the level of being a witness to oneself within the experience, the level of being a

witness to the testimonies of others, and the level of being a witness to the process of witnessing itself” (61). By encouraging veterans to speak about their experiences via fortuitous interviews³, she partakes in the second level of witnessing. This second level that Sam occupies not only points to how she immerses herself in the history of others, but also speaks to how she is a witness to this historical trauma herself since this second tier alone is also its own level of witnessing. One of her golden opportunities to partake in fortuitous interviewing also happens at the veterans’ dance. Along with engaging in conversation about 1960s music, Agent Orange, and Vietnam-era weaponry, Sam searches for her father’s name and/or photograph amongst those that had been tacked up on a bulletin board at the dance. However, “Sam didn’t find her father’s name on the list of the dead, written on lined notebook paper and tacked up beside a set of dog tags. He wasn’t from Hopewell. He was from a small community far out on the edge of the county” (112). Though she may have gleaned information about the experience of Vietnam from those who attended the dance, she still does not find what she needs – confirmation of her identity. Her father remains absent from this social gathering and since she “inherit[s]” her father’s history as her own (89), this absence further speaks to her lack of belonging to any community Hopewell has to offer.

Finding no personal historical validation at the dance, she decides to leave with Tom with plans to seduce him that evening. Once they are in Tom’s apartment, she finds that he was nothing but “a pile of kittens” where she expected to find evidence of his arousal (127). He explains that his impotency is a result of the war, that ever since his experiences in Vietnam he finds that his “mind gets in the way. It takes me where I don’t want to go” (128). As a result he has not been able to have sex post-war. Having been denied the ability to incorporate the veteran sexually, she resolves to encapsulate him in some way. “Sam put her arms around him and snuggled closer, trying to get really close to him. Since he couldn’t get inside her, she wanted to enclose him with her arms” (129). This encircling Tom demonstrates how she craves to become intimately close to the Vietnam experience. Since previous methods have failed her, this is the only way she can embody this war experience, and she even finds that wanting.

Having been disappointed in all these pursuits, she finally turns to her father’s letters that he wrote to her mother and the diary he kept while he was in country in an attempt to understand him, his history, and thus herself. She thinks the letters are minutely interesting, and only because she learns that her father had named her. Otherwise, they are pretty boring. It is his diary, on the other hand, that evokes a

strong reaction from her. After learning about his first confirmed kill, Sam finally is permitted to see the atrocious side of war:

Sam felt sick. Her stomach churned, and she felt like throwing up. She could see and smell the corpse under the banana leaves...She felt humiliated and disgusted. *The diary made her wonder what she would do in his situation.* Would she call them gooks?...

...And the diary disgusted her, with the rotting corpse, her father's shriveled feet, his dead buddy, those sickly-sweet banana leaves. She had a morbid imagination, but it had always been like a horror movie, not something real. Now everything seemed suddenly so real it enveloped her, like something rotten she had fallen into, like a skunk smell, but *she felt she had to live with it for a long time before she could take a bath.* In the jungle, they were nasty and couldn't take a bath. (205, 206, emphasis mine)

Not only does she feel physically ill due to the contents of the diary, but she also begins to adopt a soldier's resolve in her reaction to them. First, she says that "[t]he diary made her wonder what she would do in his situation" (205), which could be a normal reaction to reading something violent. This questioning of the self recognizes that there is a difference between the person who participated in killing (her father) and herself; there is a distinguishable "he" and "she" here, acknowledging two different bodies with perhaps two different reactions and this distinction spurns "wonder," imagining what *she* would do in *his* place. However, as the narrator continues, she feels as though "she had to live with it for a long time before she could take a bath" (206). Since the soldiers in Vietnam were not afforded baths regularly, she feels as though she must also abstain from bathing. By placing herself in the same circumstances as the soldier, she collapses the distinction between "he" and "she," which evidences her adoption of her father's trauma as her own.

Her "morbid imagination" (206) only affords her so much of the story she yearns to complete, however. Before reading his diary, all the other methods she used to help her understand and identify with the Vietnam experience fail her, for they represent how she acts out her trauma by remaining in the past. Still, the diary fails to tell the whole story she craves to know; instead it provides a brief macabre glimpse into this violent world. Attempt after attempt, she cannot find herself in

her father's past because he is so immersed in history. As Milton J. Bates explains, her "father has no existence in *In Country* apart from his photograph, letters, and the diary that simultaneously fascinates and repels his daughter" (228). Emmett provides some insight as to why she is having trouble in getting the whole story. He tells her, "You can't learn from the past. The main thing you learn from history is that you can't learn from history. That's what history *is*" (226, emphasis original). For Emmett and Sam, history is elusive, unknowable, unapproachable and since she cannot get inside history she remains incomplete.

Due to history's unreachability, Sam decides that she must embark on a journey to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. It is there that she finally finds her incorporation into this historical travesty because it affords a space where the past finally meets the present. After finding her father's name engraved there, she comes face-to-face with her own. "SAM A HUGHES. It is first on a line. It is down low enough to touch. She touches her own name" (244-5). Hinrichsen argues that since this Sam A Hughes is indeed not Sam, our protagonist, she remains apart and separate from this historical moment when she writes "as she fingers the name that is hers but not hers, she bears witness to what could have been but was not" (246). However, the narrator comments, "How odd it feels, as though all the names in America have been used to decorate this wall" (245). Not only is Sam incorporated into this wall and historical moment, but all these "country boy names" are as well (235). Since she identifies as Sam rather than Samantha, she has finally become a part of her father's historical past and by touching her name she is able to work through her trauma. However, in order to feel incorporated into this elite male club, Sam must undergo a masculinization of the self. She primarily does this by rejecting common small-town notions of femininity, as discussed earlier, and by embracing masculine (ad)ventures, to which we shall now turn.

Many women in her hometown find the role of becoming wife and mother attractive, but Sam does not. Further, Sam also feels that if she were to stay in Hopewell, she would be trapped into that role. After having dinner at her boyfriend's parents' house, where Lonnie also lives, his mother Martha shows Sam the spice rack she intends to give Lonnie's older brother's fiancée as an engagement present. Sam replies that it is "neat" and proceeds to think that "[i]f she married Lonnie, would anybody give her a spice rack? What would she do with a spice rack? She couldn't even name five spices" (87). Sam is so far removed from this role that she cannot even envision what *she* would do with a spice rack. This revelation causes her to want to flee the scene. "Later that evening, Lonnie wanted to drive her home, but she said she would walk" (87). She not only refuses Lonnie the

opportunity to take her home, but she also engages in a physical activity, walking, in order to escape the situation. This fleeing is a pervasive theme throughout the novel, exemplified by her perpetually running for exercise. But running gives her more than a workout, as the narrator tells us, “Sam loved to run because it set her apart from the girls at school who did things in gabby groups, like ducks. When she ran, she felt free, as if she could do anything. She rarely met other runners” (75). Physical exercise, like running or walking home, differentiates Sam from the other “girls,” and thus can be read here as a masculine activity because none of the “girls at school” engage in it.

Although running gives Sam some sort of physical release and differentiates her from the other girls, she finds that this practice is too limited in its mobility. To fix this problem, she resolves to purchase a vehicle so she could “go places” (80). At the same time, a car gives her a sense of “power” (176). She seeks to go farther distances since this will remove her from Hopewell, a town that does not understand her or her uncle. Since the town labels her and her family as “weird” (187), she yearns to extricate herself from that community. She seeks out a place that will speak to some truth about the war, since no one will tell her. If she can find this space, then perhaps she can figure out how she is shaped by that truth. In other words, she is looking for anything that will give her a clearer picture of who her father is, and she finds that greater mobility will contribute to that imagining of him. If she can imagine him, then she can begin to understand herself.

Running and driving are not Sam’s only ways of proving her “masculine qualities” (Blais 109). When she becomes overwhelmed, her thoughts tell us just how distressing she finds certain situations. For example, after she learns of Dawn’s pregnancy, Dawn tells her that she believes everything will work out “O.K.” because her boyfriend Ken is “talking about getting married” (151). Although Ken is still unaware of Dawn’s condition when he mentions his intent to marry her, Sam remains concerned and “still intended to talk Dawn into getting an abortion” (151). Marrying Ken presents “the only way [Dawn] seems able to imagine” “leav[ing] home” (Blais 111). Even under the auspices of everything working out fine, Sam still finds the prospect of her best friend having a baby and starting a family as something that should be curbed in some permanent way. Later, she thinks, “Dawn was going to have a baby...and she’d have to take it everywhere with her. It was depressing. It was as though Dawn had been captured by body snatchers” (155). To Sam, children are alien, disturbing, and “depressing,” something that shackles women to Hopewell, Kentucky, a place she wishes to flee. As the narrator informs

us at the beginning of the novel, Sam “would like to move somewhere far away – Miami or San Francisco maybe. She wants to live anywhere but Hopewell” (7).

While Sam believes that her best chance of escaping the love and marriage cycle that Hopewell has to offer is by moving somewhere far away, her mother Irene thinks that Sam should go to college and vehemently tries to persuade her to enroll at the University of Kentucky. For Irene, college also breaks this hopeless cycle as she explains, “You *have* to go to college, Sam. Women can do anything they want to now, just about” (167, emphasis original). Her mother pleads, “You’ll be sorry if you don’t go to school,” but Sam thinks “It wasn’t true that going to college guaranteed a better job” (55). Irene finds the option of attending college attractive for young women. To attend UK, Sam would have to move to Lexington, which would tether her to her mother, when she craves her independence. By the novel’s end, she reluctantly agrees to go to UK, but does not seem excited at the prospect. If the feminine is represented by the small-town notions that a young woman of seventeen is expected to marry and bear children by that age or shortly thereafter, then this is what Sam and her mother rebel against. In turn, this rebellion can then represent a masculine venture, for it rebukes the valued small-town feminine roles of being a wife and mother.

Sam does not find marriage or college, contrary to her mother, as attractive future options. What she is attracted to throughout the text is representations of violence because they give her insight as to who her father was. Along with all of her research, she and Emmett also ritualistically watch *M*A*S*H*. Concerning the show, she wonders “if there wasn’t some truth to the idea that war was attractive” (55). By watching the television show nightly, she too engages in and persistently consumes violent representations of the war, a characteristically unfeminine activity. Her research about the war also elucidates this masculine enterprise. Although her research often turns into dead ends when trying to understand her father, she still vehemently pursues this activity.

Finally, in an effort to understand her father, her masculine ventures culminate in an adventure when she flees to Cawood’s Pond to “hump the boonies.” Since “[s]ome vets blamed what they did on the horror of the jungle” she thinks that the only way to truly understand their violent behavior is by engaging in it. “Here I am, she thought. In country” (210). As Blais explains, “she must accept the fact that the actual fighting was a male experience: one she attempts to duplicate” (114). While Blais argues that Sam cannot duplicate the experience because she is female and Cawood’s Pond does not afford the same exotic backdrop as Vietnam, I contend that she does replicate the experience since she has accepted her father’s trauma

as her own. While “in country” her “morbid imagination” accosts her, which illuminates her engagement in aggressive, violent thoughts:

She recalled the poem from school about the man who had to wear a dead albatross around his neck...and he went around telling everybody at a wedding about it, like a pregnant woman thrusting her condition on everyone...But women would never really behave like that guy with the bird around his neck. Women were practical. They would bury a dead bird when it started to stink. They wouldn't collect teeth and ears for souvenirs...The chills rushed over her. Soldiers murdered babies. But women did too. They ripped their own unborn babies out of themselves and flushed them away, squirming and bloody. (215)

Since Susan Jeffords marks the feminine as “nonaggressive” (160), we can assume that Sam is engaging in masculine behaviors. These aggressive, violent images of abortion come to Sam when she engages in the most masculine adventure she pursues – humping the boonies. Those images, however, revolve around women and abortion. For Sam, babies represent the woman's albatross and this image is set alongside grunts of the Vietnam War collecting souvenirs. Thus, her quest for excavating historical experience so she can mold and understand her own identity is Sam's albatross since she is not pregnant like the unfortunate Dawn. The trauma that her father should have experienced had he come home alive becomes her own, slung across her neck with the weight of a dead bird.

In order to unleash that traumatic burden, she visits the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, where she finds her name inscribed alongside those who died in the war. Despite the fact that she is female, since she refers to herself as Sam rather than Samantha, she can locate herself amongst the masculine names that decorate the wall. She has been written into this historical moment because she has masculinized herself in name and in action. It is there, at the memorial, that she undergoes a revelation of the self, but it is only permitted because she has pursued masculine (ad)ventures. Upon the realization that she is not the only one who is negatively affected by the Vietnam War, she understands that she shares this traumatic weight with Americans placed in similar positions as herself: those who have lost central figures in their lives as a result of the war. Therefore, Mason presents Sam as our representative of traumatic transference, for the burden upon her is so heavy that she feels as though *she* could give “birth to this wall” (240). Sam only feels so strongly and can function as a representative of traumatic experience

because of her unique circumstance – that of being a child of the war, a product of it, and continually haunted by it. Thus, the weight of the Vietnam War’s trauma transverses boundaries of gender and generational experience and is placed upon Sam, the individual, a second generation trauma victim of a “stupid” (Mason 197), unjust, and unpopular war.

Notes

1. At the end of the soldier’s tour of duty he would return home and would use this euphemism to designate not only the end of his tour, but also the fact that he now was able to return to America. The capitalization of the word “World” suggests that Vietnam was not viewed as a part of the Western world due to its “backwardness” and “savagery.”

2. Although Don Ringnalda calls the Vietnam War this in his study *Fighting and Writing the Vietnam War*, this does not mean that he ascribes to this formulation. Within his work, he persuasively argues that Vietnam was not an aberration in American history, as is often believed. Rather, we can see similar examples throughout history, even dating back to the founding of the American nation. Ringnalda finds the notion that Vietnam was unique absurd. He contends that one can find many historical precedents for American wars we had lost prior to Vietnam, wars that had no front, wars that were “evil,” and wars that didn’t welcome their soldiers home with open arms (207). However, the fact remains that the war is remembered as such. How the war is remembered is what is significant here, for we are dealing with characters that ascribe to this notion that Vietnam was uniquely atrocious for its failure and the acts American soldiers committed abroad.

3. I must credit Christina Schwenkel with this clever term, “fortuitous interviewing” (16). This is a method she borrows from Wayne Fife in which the interviewer “takes advantage of the topics initiated by those with whom we are doing our study. Stated another way, this method makes use of the ‘lucky breaks’ that occur in naturalistic conversations and turns them to our own advantage as researchers” (qtd. in Schwenkel 16). Although Schwenkel puts this method to use in her historical study of how the American War is memorialized in Vietnam, I would argue that Sam engages in the same practice. She turns casual conversations with Vietnam veterans who cross her path into interviews, questioning them about their experiences and knowledge in an effort to learn more about her father.

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