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Literary Resources of the Vietnam War

If research is, as some scientists have suggested, an organized method for keeping you reasonably dissatisfied with what you have, then this overview seeks to mediate the dissatisfaction that has lately been expressed by researchers in the field of Vietnam War “literature.” Framing the word “literature” in quotation marks is meant to suggest that yoking such a word to any of a number of Vietnam War studies represents the definitional problems that plague this burgeoning field of cross-discipline research. Old chestnut that it is, “what sort of writing qualifies as ‘literature’?”

John Newman and Julie Wessling adumbrate certain facets of this dilemma in their essay entitled “Vietnam War Literature: A guide to resources at Colorado State University” (*WLA* 1.2). Indeed, it was John Newman’s dissatisfaction with the state of resources concerning Vietnam War literature that drove him to design a remedy. Mr. Newman is too modest when he describes the Colorado State University Vietnam War Literature Collection as “a pioneer effort to broaden information resources for scholars.” I say too modest, for not only was Newman’s assessment correct about the scholarly vacuum that was fast expanding outward from the concept of Vietnam War studies back in 1975, but his foresight in addressing that fact required a great deal of intellectual courage and bibliographical acumen. Out of whole cloth, John Newman created a resource that allowed serious research not only in the nascent world of Vietnam War studies, but, more significantly, he created a resource that stands to this day as an example of how fundamental to cross-curricular scholarship library-based bibliographical resources are. These resources are characterized

more than anything else by their unapologetic grounding in the media of popular or mass culture. John Newman's instincts as a professional librarian have made his contributions to the national community of scholars at least as important as the actual body of material he has so cleverly ferreted out and assembled in the Colorado State University (CSU) Vietnam War Literature Collection.

If, as suggested, research is a method for keeping one reasonably dissatisfied with what one has, then it is time to build on John Newman's original dissatisfaction. CSU's Vietnam War Literature Collection prepared the way for similar research collections that now exceed even Newman's expectations—all this is a respectful way to inform scholars that they must now consider two different (though often complementary) research collections when their interests lead them to examine and compare imaginative representations of the Vietnam War.

Now, when a prospective researcher reads Mr. Newman's hope that the CSU Vietnam War Literature Collection will eventually "be the single comprehensive national resource for all imaginative literature of the Vietnam War," that researcher must be circumspect before choosing to travel there. Ironically, perhaps, Newman's hope is swiftly approaching attainment at La Salle University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

The differences distinguishing the La Salle University Imaginative Representations of the Vietnam War Collection from the CSU collection are ones of intent and scope.

The intent of the La Salle collection is to provide a resource that allows the researcher to discover in a vast literature where certain persistent images, recurring ideological conceptions, and factual distortions originate; and then observe as they mutate into the elaborate monstrosities of imagination that eventually recur in commercial film, TV, fiction, music, and graphic art. For instance, why does the Rambo figure possess the cultural power and ideological durability that it does; or by what cultural transference does the dark and varied iconography of the "Green Beret" replace and revise that of John Wayne? The complexities of these two mythopoeic transformations have produced at least three score doctoral dissertations and published essays targeting

academic audiences. The natural evolution of individual imaginative representations of the Vietnam war are quite capable of evolving into even more grotesque absurdities and, as likely as not, becoming the most vivid afterimage imprinted on the movie-watching, novel-reading public.

An example of this phenomenon is the current deluge of heartbreaking nonsense about missing Vietnam War POWs and "patriot" soldiers being pumped out by the nation's tabloids, and, further, being dignified with analysis by a surprising number of other newspapers that ought, by now, to know better. Even reputable newspapers trumpet the preposterous reports of sober Senate committees conducting hearings about vast underground Vietnamese prison compounds, as well as about renegade Green Beret officers still operating in the far-beaten jungles of Laos and Cambodia, and who, nourished by clandestine infusions of CIA money, continue to selflessly interdict the heroin-choked Asian supply lines into the West.

The movie-going public witnesses legions of paunchy Viet vets laboring heroically against evil Asian conspiracies intent on destroying noble Western democracies. Just how virulent these absurdities have become is attested to by the fact that no fewer than 40 commercially released films have as their theme or plot just some version of the above two scenarios. Like it or not, it is such delimited versions of truth that are seen in far greater numbers by children, and by the uninformed public, than will ever be the case for documentary efforts. So the research strategy inherent in a collection such as the one at La Salle makes it possible to find one's way to the early source of such distortions. By isolating, pinning down, then dissecting such distortions when they first appear, the researcher is able to defuse these distortions and limit their power to distort further.

What follows is the official description of the Imaginative Representations of the Vietnam War Collection sent to prospective scholars:

A collection of material entitled Imaginative Representations of the Vietnam War is preserved in the Department of Special Collections at La Salle University, in the city of Philadelphia,

Pennsylvania. The fundamental aspiration of the Collection operates under a dual intention—(1) to discover how a discrete body of creative literature becomes mythopoeic. That is, how a complex event is interpreted through creative means; and, (2) to discover how creative treatments of an event use aesthetic values to reveal both the fact and emotional essence of traumatic cultural phenomena.

The primary resources for studying the above two processes are gathered in a collection presently consisting of about 6000 books of fictive writing and its criticism, together with 500 non-print items. Additionally, more than 600 films and videos are available. These films include narrative, commercial (Hollywood), pornography, and art films, as well as documentary films, curricular productions, taped seminars, and extensive TV-generated material.

The Collection is limited intentionally to imaginative literature and the visual arts. The Collection is focused on fictive writing in the form of novels, short stories, poetry, drama, filmscripts, extensive examples of graphic art, painting, video, TV productions, and sound recordings.

Contained in this Collection, and, additional to the published written material itself, are unpublished manuscripts, corrected manuscripts, shooting scripts, galley proofs, page proofs (corrected and uncorrected), holograph copies, limited editions, variant editions, runs of comic books, and cartoon art. The remainder of the Collection consists of carefully catalogued items of ephemera such as poetry broadsides, dealers' catalogues of Vietnam War fiction, published strategy games, published software, vanity publications, and curriculum guides for teaching the war through its literature across many educational levels and curricula.

*The Collection is intentionally strong in material produced after 1980, though virtually every earlier title that appears in the 2nd edition of John Newman's *Bibliography of Vietnam War Literature* also exists in the La Salle Collection. In view of that comparison, it is a fundamental goal of the Collection to make available literature that demonstrates the evolution of the perceptions of the war experience after the event had actually ended. The Collection is*

particularly committed to illuminating the process by which fictional narrative becomes mythopoeic. In using the La Salle Collection, it is possible to both question and document the sources of developing myths about the war experience. For example, one may examine and measure the impact of the original event by seeing how the experience is presented to the public through imaginative renderings. Using hundreds of examples, one can compare systematically how the post-1975 presentations and perceptions of war differ qualitatively from pre-1975 material. The more than 600 films and videos (documentary and narrative/commercial) are of seminal utility in this connection.

More globally, serious scholarly inquiry can be conducted concerning the elusive distinction between fictional narrative and autobiographical perception. The interrogation of this Coleridge-like chimera that mocks and distorts the reflexive distinctions between narrative memory and interpretive imagination fuels the enduring intellectual vigor of this Collection.

In direct support of the written and cinematic dimensions of the Collection are actively developed collections of graphic arts (posters, prints, collage, ephemera, etc.) featuring such material as ten original silk screen propaganda posters presented to Denise Levertov during the poet's trip to Hanoi in 1972. Additionally, artifacts of a musical/sound recording nature include tapes of Hanoi Hannah, recordings of Armed Forces Radio broadcasts from Saigon and Danang, tapes of attacks in progress recorded during the onslaught of Tet, underground tapes of G.I. music broadcasts in-country, and soundtracks of most films released about the war.

The Collection is directly supportive of, but by no means limited to research in the following areas of Vietnam War studies:

- American culture reflected in the war experience*
- Autobiography as mythopoeic source*
- Central America becoming a new Vietnam*
- Changing images of gender and race*
- Commercialization of the war experience*
- The "enemy's" point of view*
- Female images in the Vietnam War*
- Film versions of the war*

Gay perspectives in the war
Gender issues in the Vietnam War
Graphic art and the Vietnam War
Healing and the aftermath of war trauma
Hollywood and Vietnam
How the war is appropriated to political agendas
Interrelationship of war, literature, and the arts
Memory and the war
Missionary work carried on during the war
Narrative strategies in war writing
Non-fiction films about the Vietnam War
Nurse as narrator
Nursing and the psychology of war
Pedagogy and the war
Platoon: the game (imaginative software)
Racial tensions among American troops
Student projects for courses on the war
Vietnam and Graham Greene
Vietnam pornography
Vietnam Veterans Memorial as myth and metaphor
Vietnam War translated into commercial gaming
The war as Bildungsroman or roman à clef
Women as warriors

Scholars or professional researchers are invited to use the Collection for unlimited periods of time with the proviso that all research be conducted on the premises.

The Imaginative Representations of the Vietnam War Collection provides hundreds of texts that reveal by way of comparative readings how a “non-fiction” narrative becomes fiction (and vice versa) as the narrator refracts the recalled “event” through the lens of his imagination and his memory. The multi-media character of the La Salle Collection’s comparative approach also emphasizes the ubiquity of popular culture texts (i.e. video, novels, music, etc.) in everyday Western civilization.

Another analytical use that exploits the popular culture nature of La Salle’s Vietnam material is the opportunity it affords scholars to

witness the aesthetic transformations that occur when a text evolves through several interposed media.

Taking the well-known Bobbie Ann Mason novel, *In-Country*, as an example: the researcher may begin by viewing an uncorrected galley proof; then see author/editor emendations as they are actually incorporated into the first hardbound edition; next, analyze how the pictorial marketing treatment (i.e. cover artwork) of the first paperback edition adds to the original image and subtly alters the far drabber original edition; then examine *in situ* the changes that occur as the prose form of the novel is transmitted into a screenplay; and finally, literally watch that screenplay through its own revisions into a produced feature film. Even then, there is not an end to the comparative possibilities inherent in the La Salle Collection. The same researcher could await release of the video version of *In-Country* while listening to the audio tape version of the novel, and finally, since La Salle also acquires all known translations of a work, follow the whole progression into French, German, and Spanish translations of the original 1985 English language print versions.

The capacity to monitor the transformation of texts through various evolving narrative modes is one of the truly unique strengths of the La Salle University Imaginative Representations of the Vietnam War Collection.

If one wishes to examine some 600 examples of fiction depicting Americans fighting in Vietnam and its environs, examine an equal number of short stories anthologized or alone, examine about 100 books or anthologies of poetry and 40 examples of dramatic productions, then one should travel to the CSU Collection. The CSU Collection is by design precise in its intent, focusing *only* on Americans fighting in Vietnam. In addition to published material, the CSU Collection is rich in unpublished manuscripts, although this material is largely uncatalogued and access to the unpublished material is subject to tight restrictions.

What the prospective researcher will not find in the CSU Collection are extensive secondary resources that analyze or contextualize the works of fiction held there. Neither will the researcher find works that clearly evince the place the Vietnam War has come to occupy in the evolving socio-historical

settings of contemporary American culture. For those perspectives—especially those best represented by film, music, and graphic media—the researcher might better travel to La Salle's Collection. As a rule of thumb, nearly all the titles available in the CSU Collection are also held in the La Salle Collection. Researchers should note also that the La Salle Collection holds some 600 films and plays as well as some 300 pieces of graphic art.

Besides the two great collections of imaginative representations of the war at CSU and La Salle, there are three additional resources offering voluminous documentary or factual material. These three collections of documents and various primary source material are (1) *The History of the Vietnam War on Microfiche*, (2) *The John M. Echols Collection—Selections on the Vietnam War*, and (3) the 30,000 cubic feet of records created in the Republic of Vietnam by army commands and made available through the National Archives in Washington D.C. Both *The History of the Vietnam War on Microfiche* and *The John M. Echols Collection* are compilations being marketed by University Microfilms, Inc. The following descriptions are cobbled together from various advertising copy appearing since 1990 and from review media.

The History of the Vietnam War on Microfiche

Edited by Douglas Pike, this collection when completed as projected, will contain 365,000 pages of historical detail and retrospective literature, including documents, newspapers, periodicals, photographs, monographs, maps, and graphs. The collection includes accounts of military strategies, guerilla warfare, the Viet Cong, the massacres at Hue and My Lai, the Tet Offensive, Cambodia, Laos, the Ho Chi Minh Trail, United Nations dialogue, Paris Talks, pacification programs, and defoliation. Interviews with POWs and defectors, Gallup and Roper public opinion polls, and propaganda leaflets and posters are included as well. This collection is predicted to grow to 1,000,000 items available on microfilm.

Douglas Pike, Director of the Indochina Archives at the University of California, Berkeley, has collected materials from not only the U.S., but also from Saigon, Hanoi, Peking, Moscow, Tokyo, Australia, and Western Europe. Among units now

available: Unit 1—Grand Strategy and General Assessment of the Vietnam War; Unit 2—General History of the Vietnam War; and Unit 3—Topical History of the Vietnam War, with sections on anti-war activity, literature, POW/MIAs, public opinion, statistical data, technology, veterans, and war atrocities. More detailed information on this collection is available from the publisher UMI.

The John M. Echols Collection

The John M. Echols Collection offers more than 30,000 volumes of primary resources, including monographs published in North and South Vietnam and Laos (both government and private sector). Government documents such as internal reports, statistics, press releases, speeches, propaganda, and research reports provide information on the views of the U.S., Chinese, Soviet, Australian, British, Korean, and Philippine governments. In addition, the collection contains publications from non-governmental organizations such as anti-war groups, left-wing organizations, pro-war factions, the "loyal opposition" in the U.S. and allied nations, and religious groups. All material is selected from the vast holding of the John M. Echols Collection at Cornell University. Included are over 7,000 volumes of English-language material, approximately 2,000 volumes of French material that focus on the French colonial period, and nearly 20,000 volumes of Vietnamese language material. The English-language materials are being released first, followed by French, then Vietnamese materials.

The John M. Echols Collection emphasizes primary rather than secondary source material. The collection is available, in part, from UMI. Researchers may also travel to Cornell University to work directly with hard copy.

National Archives

In 1987, the National Archives accessioned from the Department of the Army approximately 30,000 cubic feet of records. Since then, about half these records have been processed by the National Archives and about 6000 feet opened to researchers. Currently available to the public include records of divisions, separate brigades, support commands, combat and

support battalions, and smaller units. An estimated 5000 cubic feet of processed records remain closed because of security classifications. These records include those of HQ MACV, HQ USARV, I and II Field Forces Vietnam, XXIV Corps, Military Assistance Advisory Group Cambodia, and MAAGV. The National Archives staff is currently processing the records of U.S. advisory elements to Vietnamese military commands and provinces and records of the Civil Operations and Rural Developments Support program. □