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## Displaced Trauma and the Legacies of the Vietnam War in *Hocus Pocus*

As John Leonard observes in his review of *Hocus Pocus*, everything in the novel “is exquisitely balanced, from the dyslexics and the illiterates to the number of women loved and men murdered” (424). Of the many contrasts the novel creates, perhaps none is as richly layered as the anecdote of Letitia Smiley, the beautiful Tarkington senior who disappeared in 1922 after being crowned “Lilac Queen” for her barefoot race victory (191).<sup>1</sup> Through narrator Eugene Debs Hartke’s detective work, the reader learns that she was most likely murdered by Tarkington Provost Kensington Barber. Reduced to a mere skull with perfect teeth, Smiley’s supposed remains are compared to “the more mutilated bodies of soldiers in Vietnam [who] were positively identified, by their imperfect teeth.” (191)<sup>2</sup> While generally juxtaposing Smiley’s murder with soldiers killed in Vietnam, the novel also symbolically balances her skull with “the severed head of a bearded old man” in Cambodia (46)—a recurring, traumatic image for Hartke. To this grim pairing of skulls, Vonnegut adds a third layer of connection: the image of escaped prisoners sporting “the broad purple hair ribbons worn by all the girls in that footrace” (194) to mark their status as “Freedom Fighters.”<sup>3</sup>

Like the rest of *Hocus Pocus*, Letitia Smiley’s story and its links to other violent historical moments invite a critique of America’s military, schools, and prisons, allowing Vonnegut to examine a range of injustices in U.S. institutions. Invoking murder, possible rape, and war, the anecdote is also fundamentally about sites of trauma. Unearthed by accident, Smiley’s skull becomes mixed with images of

corpses from Vietnam and actual corpses from a 19th-century diphtheria epidemic and the post-prison-break siege, forcing readers to confront the interrelatedness of multiple traumatic moments of the past. Drawing on literary, historical, and gender studies approaches, this essay investigates the connections between war-related trauma, family dynamics, history, and cultural memory in Vonnegut's penultimate novel. Specifically, I argue that *Hocus Pocus* revisits the trauma of the Vietnam War to challenge revisionist narratives of the conflict that emerged during the 1980s. In these examinations of trauma, Vonnegut uses familial relationships to explore the protagonist's psychological and emotional scars from Vietnam. Whereas Vonnegut uses Hartke's interactions with women to examine the personal impacts of war, he turns to father-son relationships and the construction of historical narratives to analyze the broader cultural legacies of Vietnam. Ultimately, through Hartke's fragmented but carefully structured narrative, *Hocus Pocus* both writes trauma and writes about trauma,<sup>4</sup> providing a crucial addition to Vonnegut's anti-war texts.

### Remembering Trauma: 1980s Contexts and Narratives

Like *Mother Night*, *Hocus Pocus* is a first-person prison memoir that explores issues of war guilt, but it takes on a wider range of social issues via Hartke's experiences teaching at Tarkington, a college for the super wealthy, and Athena, a racially segregated prison. Set only eleven years in the future from its 1990 publication date, the novel's near futuristic setting and realistic texture invite readers to examine "present-day America" and the possibility of "just what might happen in the next decade" if the trends of the 1980s continued (Klinkowitz, *Vonnegut's America* 102). As Jerome Klinkowitz suggests in *Kurt Vonnegut's America*, these trends include "foreign investment in America" (102), the "privatization of formerly public or even governmental institutions" (102), and the question of "how to come to terms with the legacy of Vietnam" (103). While Vonnegut's response to the former two trends is hyperbole (in the future a Japanese "Army of Occupation" runs the U.S. prison and health care systems), he addresses the third trend by undermining the revisionist representations of the Vietnam War that flourished in the Reagan era.

Although films and memoirs such as *If I Die in a Combat Zone* (1973), *Dispatches* (1977), *The Deer Hunter* (1978) and *Apocalypse Now* (1979) tried to explore the dark, complex realities of the Vietnam War, by 1980, many Americans seemed willing to repress their memories of the war and to embrace new narratives.<sup>5</sup> Even before he was elected president, Ronald Reagan began to create a new version of the war—one that would transform the military loss in Vietnam into a "noble cause." During his August 18, 1980 speech at the Veterans of Foreign Wars Convention,

Reagan called upon his listeners to stop living “with the ‘Vietnam Syndrome’” and to recognize “that ours was, in truth, a noble cause.”<sup>6</sup> After blaming the “North Vietnamese aggressors” for misleading representations of the war, Reagan depicted U.S. intervention in Vietnam as an effort to preserve the autonomy of South Vietnam in the wake of “a totalitarian neighbor bent on conquest.” More than a revisionist spin on U.S. policies of containment, Reagan’s speech offered listeners a spiritual cleansing, a way to move past feelings of shame:

We dishonor the memory of 50,000 young Americans who died in that cause when we give way to feelings of guilt as if we were doing something shameful, and we have been shabby in our treatment of those who returned. They fought as well and as bravely as any Americans have ever fought in a war. They deserve our gratitude, our respect, and our continuing concern.

While providing emotional comfort and a more palatable vision of U.S. combat in Vietnam, Reagan’s speech also carefully shifted representations of the Vietnam conflict as a “quagmire” or “unwinnable war” to a winnable one. Explaining the “true” lesson of Vietnam, Reagan proclaimed, “that we will never again ask young men to fight and possibly die in a war our government is afraid to let them win.” By blaming Congress, the anti-war movement, and the media for the loss in Vietnam and depicting it as winnable, Reagan’s comments helped set the stage for a series of popular revisionist narratives about the war.

The Reagan years were marked by an outpouring of novels, films, and television shows about Vietnam, which, as literary critic Phil Beidler noted, led to the “bad business” of spectacle and misrepresentation. While many television programs such as *Magnum, P.I.*, *Riptide*, *The A-Team*, and *Miami Vice* reclaimed the Vietnam veteran and gave him heroic status outside the contexts of war, a whole subgenre of films encouraged Reagan-inspired revisionist mythmaking. Films like *Rambo: First Blood I & II* (1982, 1985), *Uncommon Valor* (1983), and *Missing in Action* (1984), not only restored the military heroism, physical strength, and honor of Vietnam veterans, but they also gave their heroes an opportunity to “win” by returning to free American prisoners of war still held by the North Vietnamese. Enormously popular and high grossing, the films helped reinforce Reagan-era myths of remaining POWs in Vietnam<sup>7</sup> while restoring a powerful and remasculinized representation of America. As Susan Jordan explains, popular representations of the Vietnam War were “employed as vehicles for a renewed sense of American masculinity” (169) that took root in both the American character and foreign policy.

Reacting to 1980s transformations of the Vietnam War into “a noble cause” and an excuse for rearmament, *Hocus Pocus* offers a starkly different representation of the conflict. Rather than erase or conceal the scars of Vietnam, *Hocus Pocus* exposes sites of personal and national trauma to promote honest recollections and accountability. As literary critic Donald Morse suggests, and Vonnegut observes in *Fates Worse Than Death*, *Hocus Pocus*’s representations of the Vietnam War candidly position the United States as an imperialist power.<sup>8</sup> Ultimately, Vonnegut revisits the traumatic legacies of Vietnam to challenge readers to reject imperialism and to reclaim ideals of democracy, decency, and humanity.

From the very beginning of *Hocus Pocus*, Vonnegut indicates his pacifist position on the Vietnam War (and war in general) through the name of his narrator, Eugene Debs Hartke. The very first sentence of Hartke’s memoir states that he was named “in honor of Eugene Debs of Terre Haute, Indiana” (1), the famous Socialist labor leader and five-time presidential candidate. While Debs’s socialist ideals stand in stark contrast to the hyper capitalism of the Tarkington Trustees, Vonnegut also clearly chose his protagonist’s namesake for Debs’s opposition to World War I.

The novel’s epigraph is an excerpt from Debs’s speech at his sentencing hearing for urging resistance to the draft. The narrator is also named for Vance Hartke, a three-term Indiana Democratic Senator, who championed civil rights and social welfare legislation, but was “best known for his criticism of the American involvement of the wars in Southeast Asia” (Saxon). Hartke famously broke with Lyndon Johnson over the Vietnam War, sending a letter opposing the war signed by fourteen Senate colleagues in January 1966 (Karnow 485). Vance Hartke also published *The American Crisis in Vietnam* in 1968 and ran in the 1972 Democratic presidential primary, calling for complete American withdrawal from the war. While Debs remained an important heroic figure for Vonnegut until the end of his career,<sup>9</sup> the combined references to Debs and Hartke heighten the critiques of war and social, racial, and economic injustices. Vonnegut thus provides a moral touchstone for his readers and a framework for his own critiques of 1980s revisionist accounts of Vietnam.

The novel’s title also immediately establishes Vonnegut’s disdain for the false narratives of war that enabled both the killing in Southeast Asia and later postwar revisionist accounts. Although Vonnegut does not directly reference the title until almost half way through the novel, the reader is well prepared for Hartke’s definition of “hocus pocus” as empty rhetoric. The Vietnam War is associated with myths like “the Tooth Fairy, the Easter Bunny, and Santa Claus” (61), and we are told early on that dying American soldiers never had illusions that they

had “accomplished something worthwhile” (12). Reflecting on his late-war press briefings and speeches to fresh troops, Hartke more overtly defines “hocus pocus”: “During my last year there, when my ammunition was language instead of bullets, I invented justifications for all the killing and dying which impressed even me! I was a genius of lethal focus pocus!” (153-54). This powerful indictment of language as a weapon of war becomes a leitmotif throughout the novel.

While Vonnegut links the lethal nature of propaganda to a longer history of wars and imperialism, the novel specifically critiques the Reagan- and Bush-era “hocus pocus” that attempted to rewrite cultural narratives of the Vietnam War. Using the character Jason Wilder as a stand-in for 1980s neoconservative spokesmen, Vonnegut directly explores the issue of Reagan’s revisionist history via Hartke’s hearing and ultimate dismissal from Tarkington. Echoing Reagan’s rhetoric, Wilder begins his prominent role in the board’s investigation with these remarks: “I want to say first...that I am in nothing less than awe, Professor Hartke, of your magnificent record in the Vietnam War. If the American people had not lost their courage and ceased to support you, we would be living in a very different and much better world, and especially in Asia.” (111-12). As the hearing progresses, it becomes clear that Wilder and the conservative trustees only value Hartke’s medals and rank along with their own impressions of his war service. Although ostensibly reprimanded for his adulterous affairs with the president’s wife and other women, Hartke identifies the real reason for his dismissal: “I had personal knowledge of the disgrace that was the Vietnam War.” (99) Not only is Hartke a living witness to the horrors of the war, but he also poses a risk of undermining myths that the war was winnable and noble. When taped evidence of Hartke sharing war memories of “unspeakable cruelty and stupidity and waste” (125) surfaces, Wilder underscores the danger of those recollections by asking Hartke, “why on Earth would you want to tell such tales to young people who need to love their country?” (126).

The most central way that Vonnegut challenges the 1980s revisionist accounts of Vietnam is through Hartke’s narrative itself. A lieutenant colonel, West Point graduate, and professional soldier from 1961 to 1975, Hartke has the ethos to counter representations of the war as “a noble cause.” Hartke, in fact, wastes no time dispelling myths about the war’s purpose. He notes early on that it was “about nothing but the ammunition business” (2) and later claims that he “was in show business, trying to get a big audience for the Government on TV by killing real people with live ammunition” (57). Rather than offer his own full history of the war, Vonnegut uses Hartke’s memoir to touch on key moments and traumas. Although we learn that Hartke spent three years in Vietnam, there is little mention of specific

tours, places, or battles. The battles and campaigns that are mentioned, however, recall three particularly scarring moments: the 1975 fall of Saigon and the chaotic evacuation of the American embassy; the Tet Offensive battle of Huế, one of the “bloodiest and most destructive battles of the war” (Herring 190), which helped convince Walther Cronkite and the nation that the conflict was unwinnable; and the bombing of and incursion into Cambodia, which prompted the Kent State protests and killings and sparked nationwide anti-war demonstrations. While Vonnegut took historical liberties in making Hartke “the very last of the Americans” to leave Vietnam, the symbolism of this distinction is clear.<sup>10</sup> Hartke is a living monument to military loss, the abandonment of promises to the South Vietnamese, and the technological and corporeal wastes of war. Whether recounting fragging incidents, wartime drug use, medals awarded for the use of napalm, civilian deaths, or youth sent home in body bags, Hartke’s narrative leaves little space for viewing the war in Southeast Asia as a “noble cause.”

### **Living Trauma: Familial Relationships**

Were he to use Hartke’s memoir as a mere counterpoint to 1980s revisionist accounts of Vietnam, Vonnegut could have saved his critiques for one of his public speeches or essays. As a humanist, pacifist, and novelist interested in analyzing the complexities of the late-twentieth-century American experience, Vonnegut ensures that readers probe the personal as well as cultural traumatic legacies of Vietnam. Having already created Billy Pilgrim, the protagonist of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, whose mind and body are so ravaged by war that he becomes “unstuck in time,” Vonnegut employs other strategies for representing Hartke’s psychological and emotional wounds of war. Rather than adopting the gritty realism of Vietnam texts by Michael Herr, Tim O’Brien, Philip Caputo and Larry Heinemann, Vonnegut explores the personal traumatic legacies of the war via Hartke’s familial, romantic<sup>11</sup> and other relationships.

Vonnegut uses Hartke’s relationships, in part, because he was well aware of the stereotypical, two-dimensional images of veterans that circulated in the media after the war. Vonnegut directly confronts these stereotypes via GRIOT, the popular computer game that predicts people’s futures based on their age, race, education, drug use and current situation. Commenting on his own GRIOT results, Hartke writes, “It knew all about the Vietnam War and the sorts of veterans it had produced. It made me a burned-out case, on the basis of my length of my service over there, I think. It had me become a wife-beater and an alcoholic, and winding up all alone on Skid Row.” (103) This image of the dysfunctional, burned-out veteran is later

reinforced by Hartke's lawyer, who wants to convince the jury of Hartke's "deeply disturbed mental state" (156): "They will already believe that all you Vietnam veterans are crazy, because that's their reputation." (156) Not wanting to perpetuate these stereotypes or the graphic representations of the war that "had become staples of TV entertainment" (125), Vonnegut eschews gory detail, obscenity, and recurring battle field flashbacks. Instead, Hartke's narrative is marked by its lack of profanity, understatement, directness, and black humor.

Nevertheless, given all the traumatic events he has experienced, it is almost inevitable that Hartke reveals post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms and moments of breakdown. Almost immediately after he is freed from Tarkington, Hartke has a flashback to a family dinner at a Chinese restaurant shortly after his return from Vietnam. Almost literally at the center of the novel, the episode echoes the chilly, sometimes hostile homecomings many real veterans experienced. After doing terribly on his entrance exam for M.I.T.'s physics graduate program, Hartke joins his family for what he had hoped would be a comforting meal. Instead, Hartke discovers that he is a "freak" to his own family. His wife and mother-in-law have moved the family to Baltimore, behaving "exactly as though [he] had been killed in Vietnam" (160). Hartke's emotional estrangement deepens as he remembers his dead brother-in-law and realizes that "Nobody asked [him] what it was like to be home from the war." (161) The tension of the scene builds as someone at the next table discusses severed limbs from his medical waste job and implies that Hartke should understand because of his war service. At that moment a longhaired young man touches Hartke's crew cut and he "explodes." After creating "pandemonium" by knocking the young man into a waiter, Hartke runs outside, where he realizes that "Everybody and everything was my enemy. I was back in Vietnam." (163) He winds up "shaking like a leaf" and wanting "to bark like a dog" (169) because of the PTSD-triggered flashbacks.

Like the rest of Hartke's memoir, this episode unfolds in fragments over the course of sequential chapters and is interspersed with other brief anecdotes and pieces of information. In part, the halting, disjointed narration most likely mirrors Hartke's original experience of the event as well as his later recollection of those traumatic moments. Moreover, like Letitia Smiley's skull, Hartke's most traumatic war memories and experiences must be "dug up" as the reader goes deeper into the novel.<sup>12</sup> By juxtaposing Hartke's breakdown with other characters' stories and details, however, Vonnegut is able to displace or symbolically transfer some of Hartke's war trauma. Although the reader learns early in Hartke's story that his wife Margaret and his mother-in-law Mildred become mentally ill from "a

powerful strain of insanity” (5), Vonnegut carefully locates Hartke’s original discovery of their mental illness within Hartke’s own moments of “temporary insanity” (167) at the Chinese restaurant. As Hartke explains, “it was on this same enchanted evening that I was told that my wife, the mother of my children, had a remarkable number of ancestors and collateral relatives with bats in their belfries on her mother’s side.” (161) This symbolic displacement of trauma allows Hartke to avoid lapsing into the stereotype of the non-functioning, “insane” veteran and enables Vonnegut to comment on the domestic burdens and repeated cycles of war.

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs research has shown that male veterans with PTSD have increased difficulties with their marriages and other family relationships. Vietnam Veterans had particularly difficult familial readjustments. According to one study, approximately “38% of Vietnam veteran marriages failed within six months of the veteran’s return from Southeast Asia,” with the divorce rate for veterans with PTSD being “two times greater than for veterans without PTSD” (Price and Stevens). Families of Vietnam veterans also experienced dramatic increases in interpersonal violence<sup>13</sup> and stress, and often suffered in multiple ways from the burden of caregiving. In an interesting reversal of the normal caregiver burden, it is Hartke who winds up assuming responsibility for cleaning, cooking, and tending to his mentally ill wife and mother-in-law. Infusing a bit of dark humor into the situation, Vonnegut does not fill Hartke’s domestic sphere with the violence that marked so many real veterans’ homes. Instead, Mildred and Margaret’s collective lapse into insanity is marked by juvenile behavior and pastimes. Like small children, they spend their days watching *Sesame Street*, reading to each other by flashlight in tents made of chairs and bed sheets, dancing, playing hide and seek, and creating huge spider webs out of torn linens.<sup>14</sup> While adding a bit of grim comic relief and neutralizing the potential violence of Hartke’s displaced insanity, Margaret and Mildred’s shared madness nonetheless registers some of the domestic trauma wrought by war.

To reinforce the connections between Mildred and Margaret’s hereditary mental illness and war, Vonnegut repeatedly refers to their “booby-trapped genes” (48), invoking the deadly explosives used pervasively in the guerilla fighting of Vietnam. Hartke himself connects their insanity to the Vietnam War several times in his narrative. Commenting on Mildred’s “mania for dancing,” for example, Hartke remarks, “Dancing until she dropped wasn’t nearly as loony as wanting to bomb Vietnam back to the Stone Age, or bombing anyplace back to the Stone Age.” (47) He also notes that Mildred’s craziness was bearable because of its similarities to the war: “In the Army I had grown used to people who talked nonsense all day



long. Vietnam was 1 big hallucination. After adjusting to that, I could adjust to anything.” (81) Later Hartke explains to fellow teacher Andrea Wakefeld that caring for his wife and mother-in-law is “easier than what I did for Presidents and Generals and Henry Kissinger” (171). The references to Air Force General Curtis LeMay’s famous quotation and to Hartke’s years of service in Vietnam thus symbolically link Mildred’s and Margaret’s mental illness to the Vietnam War while commenting on the insanity of war more generally.

Given these connections between insanity and war, it is significant that the first victim of Mildred’s hereditary insanity is Jack Patton, Hartke’s best friend from West Point and brother-in-law. Although Hartke never labels Jack as “insane,” Vonnegut leaves little room for doubting Jack’s sanity. Over the course of the novel, we learn that Jack invented an electric chair for rats, complete “with little straps and a black hood” (45), won the Silver Star for initiating a napalm attack on a Vietnamese village full of civilians (51-52), and never laughed despite his constant claim that “he had to laugh like hell.” As Hartke observes, Jack also “never worried” about the killing he did in Vietnam (73). Jack himself mentions, “I think I might have a screw loose. I can’t care what might happen next to me or anyone.” (74) To reinforce Jack’s madness, Vonnegut juxtaposes Patton with Alton Darwin, the leader of the attack on Scipio and Tarkington. Comparing the two, Hartke remarks, “Alton Darwin had the same untightened screw. He was a convicted mass murderer, but never showed any remorse that I could see.” (74) Jack’s character, of course, embodies the central thesis of Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*: to sanely engage in war is an insane act.<sup>15</sup>

While Vonnegut loosely associates cycles of war and hereditary madness via Jack Patton’s character, he probes these connections more explicitly through father-son relationships in Hartke’s life. Early in his memoir, Hartke explicitly blames his father for the career path that led to an education at West Point, fourteen years of military service, and several tours of duty in Vietnam, Cambodia and elsewhere. Accepted to the University of Michigan, where he planned to study English and to continue performing as a jazz musician, Hartke instead winds up at West Point because his father needs to rebuild his reputation. As Jerome Klinkowitz has noted, Hartke’s shift from a career in journalism and music mirrors some of Vonnegut’s own educational choices that were shaped by his father.<sup>16</sup> Beyond these autobiographical details, however, Vonnegut offers a broader critique of the patriarchal institutions and traditions that support cycles of war. For example, Vonnegut connects Hartke’s father to the military-industrial complex that provided the deadly technologies of World War II, Vietnam and other Cold War

connections. The first thing we learn about Hartke's chemical engineer father is that his research was invaluable to the war effort. Because of his father's research in plastics, the family moves to Midland City shortly after Pearl Harbor so that he can help the produce "bomb-release mechanisms and swivel mounts for machine guns on B-17 bombers" (23) from synthetic materials.

As Hartke explains the particular circumstances that led to his West Point appointment, the connections between Hartke's military career and his father's scientific research become stronger. After receiving a black eye in a fight with his lover's husband, Hartke's father encourages his son to enter the county science fair in order to help the "family's image problem" (26). Ultimately, Hartke's father creates most of the science exhibit on chemically produced crystals,<sup>17</sup> and the father-son team winds up at the state science competition, where Hartke's "prize" is a West Point appointment. After learning of these military career prospects, Hartke's father exclaims, "I've got a son I can be proud of now." (44) The very dynamic of Hartke's father seeking to restore his wounded masculinity through the accomplishments of his son is rich with patriarchal implications. While generally interested in challenging patriarchy, *Hocus Pocus* explicitly critiques the patriarchal traditions and institutions that have supported an ongoing cycle of war, violence, and mass death. Hartke notes some of these connections as he reflects on the path that led to his military career:

The assassination of an Austrian archduke led to World War I, and probably to World War II as well. Just as surely, my father's black eye brought me to the sorry state in which I find myself today. He was looking for some way, almost any way, to recapture the respect of the community, and to attract favorable attention from Barrytron's new owner, Du Pont. Du Pont, of course, has now been taken over by I.G. Farben of Germany, the same company that manufactured and packaged and labeled and addressed the cyanide gas used to kill civilians of all ages, including babes in arms, during the Holocaust. (28)

This passage positions Hartke's own military service in Vietnam within a larger cycle of deadly twentieth century wars, and directly implicates chemical and other scientific companies in mass civilian deaths. Born of his father's wounded pride, the fruits of his father's chemical research, and a deal between a civilian scientist and a decorated general, Hartke's military career stands as a fitting symbol for U.S. military involvement in Vietnam—a war marked by the use of napalm, Agent

Orange, devastating bombing campaigns, and escalations that attempted to prevent a U.S. military loss.

Literary critic Gary McMahon suggests that *Hocus Pocus*, like much of Vonnegut's fiction, "debunks patriarchy" (17). McMahon writes, "Fathers in Vonnegut's tales—from *Hocus Pocus* to 'Harrison Bergeron' and back—have no more idea of what's going on than the arch patriarch himself, the president of the United States." (17) While McMahon points to the comedic reunion of Hartke and his illegitimate son Rob Roy, many of the novel's attempts to discredit patriarchal authority are quite direct. Recalling his role in preventing Vietnamese civilians from evacuating Saigon and the absurd wastefulness of pushing helicopters into the South China Sea, Hartke writes in third-person perspective, "And he had lost all respect for himself and the leadership of his country, just as, 17 years earlier, he had lost all respect for himself and his father at the Cleveland, Ohio Science Fair." (53) Because *Hocus Pocus* links patriarchs to cycles of war, violence committed by Tarkington's President "Tex" Johnson and Provost Kensington Barber,<sup>18</sup> and general patterns of economic inequality and racial injustice, it is not surprising that Vonnegut severs the patrilineal lines of most of the novel's characters. Hartke's legitimate son, Eugene Jr., stops communicating with him, and even the more promising reunion with his illegitimate son, Rob Roy, turns into nothing "nobler than a pack of lies" (McMahon 16)—more "hocus pocus." To reinforce this idea, Vonnegut removes the male heads of most of Scipio's families. Jerry Peck, "a direct descendant of the President of Tarkington College" (212) dies after breathing toxic fumes from paint remover; Lyle Hooper and Whitey VanArsdale, Scipio's chief businessmen, are executed in retaliation for their attacks on the truce-seeking "Freedom Fighters"; and even Damon Stern, Tarkington's compassionate and outspoken history professor, is murdered while trying to save horses during the initial assault on the college and town.

In keeping with critiques of traditional nuclear families in *Slapstick*, *Galapagos*, and elsewhere,<sup>19</sup> Vonnegut allows only female-headed, alternative family structures to survive and flourish in the wake of Scipio's decline. From Hartke we learn that his own daughter Melanie is living with another woman in Paris, that Lyle Hooper's wife ran off to Bermuda with her lesbian lover, and that Wanda June Stern, Damon's widow, took her children to Lackawanna to live with relatives. By escaping the economically and environmentally devastated Scipio, Wanda June and her extended family offer a small glimmer of hope and a positive contrast to the kinship of the "Ruling Class,"<sup>20</sup> who have effectively unleashed the problems on Scipio and the rest of America.

## Writing Trauma: Vietnam and “Multidirectional Memory”

So far we have examined Hartke’s memoir as a vehicle for exploring the personal impacts of the Vietnam War and Vonnegut’s critiques of the historical revisionism and the patriarchal institutions that beget cycles of armed conflict. Hartke’s narrative itself—the individual memories written on scraps of paper interspersed with layers of history—offers further insights into the multifaceted dimensions of trauma. Perhaps Vonnegut’s “most richly detailed and textured” novel (McInerney 12), *Hocus Pocus* combines satiric critique with an exploration of how writing and memory can help manage individual and collective traumas. Indeed, Hartke’s narrative unfolds like memory itself. As Michael Rothberg explains in *Multidirectional Memory*, “Memory is, as Freud recognized, primarily an associative process that works through displacement and substitution...[and it] emerges and recedes in fits and starts—especially when the memory of traumatic events is at stake.” (12, 16-17) Although Hartke’s memoir roughly moves in chronological order from his childhood to his present imprisonment in 2001, it continuously loops back to previously mentioned details and events or leaps forward in time because of associations between characters or moments. Vonnegut offers this richly textured process of remembering Vietnam to confront the cultural scars of the war and to connect it via “multidirectional memory” to other moments of trauma, such as the Attica prison riot of 1971 and the bombing of Hiroshima.

Hartke’s narrative is, as Todd Davis suggests, an attempt “to assuage the guilt of his country’s and his own unethical and inhumane actions” (127). Literally framing Hartke’s narrative are drawings of his “worst sins” (156)—stick figures tallying the “number that represents both [his] 100-percent-legal military kills and [his] adulteries” (322). Significantly, Hartke begins the list of adulteries to serve as “a prosthesis for [his] memory” (30). More than a substitute for memory, the first list begets the second as the process of remembering adulteries forces him to consider how many people he has killed with conventional weapons. Despite his attempt to come up with a concrete number that can be engraved on his tombstone, Hartke’s lists ultimately reveal that issues of culpability are not easily located or resolved. Vonnegut makes it clear to the reader that the “true” number of Hartke’s crimes is potentially as unreliable as the body counts in Vietnam. Immediately after he introduces the idea of creating a list of his military kills, Hartke adds these stipulations:

If my list of women isn't to include high school or prostitutes, then my list of those whose lives I took shouldn't include possibles and probables, or those killed by artillery or air strikes called in by me, and surely not all those, many of them Americans, who died as an indirect result of all my hocus pocus, all my blah blah blah. (154)

These multiple restrictions create doubt that Hartke's final tabulation can actually represent the number of human lives he has taken, as well as challenge his most direct statements of culpability. Time and again Hartke points to the needless deaths caused by his "lethal hocus pocus" and even mentions that without words as ammunition "we couldn't have had a war." (254) Thus Hartke's lists generate more questions about morality and accountability than clear answers. Ultimately, they are better vehicles for memory and managing trauma than fixed accounts of Hartke's experiences.

This resistance to fixing Hartke's guilt allows him to remain "a puzzlingly ambiguous character" (Farrell 191), and mirrors the novel's broader resistance to narrative and historical closure. Just as he rejects 1980s revisionist attempts to imbue the Vietnam War with new cultural meaning, Vonnegut refuses to provide his own clear-cut, potentially healing narrative of the war. Instead, *Hocus Pocus* exposes but does not mend the wounds of the Vietnam War. Through Hartke's memoir, the novel offers a "middle voice"<sup>21</sup> for writing the traumas of Vietnam. Hartke is both perpetrator and victim; he is both subject and witness; and he is both "the ruling class" and the object of its persecution. His experiences link personal, individual, and domestic legacies of trauma with national, cultural, and institutional ones. In short, Hartke's narrative captures the full complexity of memory: "the individual, embodied, and lived side *and* the collective, social and constructed side of our relations to the past." (Rothberg 4)

While offering specific explorations of Vietnam's traumas, *Hocus Pocus* also embodies elements of Rothberg's concept of "multidirectional memory"—"the dynamic transfers that take place between diverse places and times during the act of remembrance" (Rothberg 11). By including second-hand accounts of other characters' memories of traumatic events along with snippets of history gleaned through his research, Hartke's memoir takes on collective and comparative dimensions. As Donald Morse observes, *Hocus Pocus* weaves together "several crucial, if disastrous, events of the twentieth century," the bomb, Auschwitz, Vietnam, and Attica, to illustrate specific dimensions of "humanity's inhumanity" (137). Taken collectively, the historical traumas unearthed in *Hocus Pocus* present

a narrative that “shows that human beings are vicious enough to commit every imaginable atrocity” (Vonnegut, *Fates* 145). However, by placing particular historical events and traumas side by side, the novel also takes on a narrative aspects of multidirectional memory. According to Rothberg, multidirectional memory can spark “unexpected acts of empathy and solidarity” and become “the very grounds on which people construct and act out visions of justice” (19).

Perhaps the most dramatic example of this type of empathy and solidarity is Hartke’s friendship with Athena’s warden, Hiroshi Matsumoto. Hartke initially fears that his military tours of duty in Vietnam will prevent him from getting a teaching job at the prison. Instead, his service offers a locus of solidarity. Hartke explains, “My confession that I had served in Vietnam, to my amazement, made Warden Matsumoto feel that we were almost brothers!” (234) A high-ranking officer in “an Army of Occupation in business suits” (239), Matsumoto feels a kinship to Hartke initially because of their shared experience of being “shipped to an alien land on a dangerous mission of vainglorious lunacy” (234). To the bond of their respective military and economic quagmires, Vonnegut adds a deeper sense of shared trauma. After working at the prison for two years, Hartke eventually learns that Matsumoto survived the atomic bombing of Hiroshima when he was eight years old. Vonnegut underscores this primary trauma by literally inscribing the site of the bombing into his name—Hiroshi’s first name combined with the first two letters of his last name. Although Hartke does not go into great detail about the eight years he spends living next to Matsumoto, he clearly indicates how devastating Matsumoto’s death is for him. “After Vietnam, I thought there was nothing that could ever hit me that hard again. I thought I was used to dead bodies, no matter whose. Wrong again,” Hartke confesses (290). The connections between the Japanese “tours of duty” in the U.S., the bombing of Hiroshima, and the conflict in Southeast Asia obviously highlight the racial, economic, and civilian dimensions of these respective catastrophes. Nevertheless, it is the empathetic unsettlement<sup>22</sup> of Matsumoto and Hartke’s friendship that Vonnegut emphasizes in the end. Matsumoto’s suicide at the base of the Hiroshima monument not only prompts Hartke’s final admonition against conquests, but it also warns of the dangers of narrative closure. Like the trauma of Vietnam, the wounds of Hiroshima must be left open to prevent future bombing catastrophes.

Hartke’s years of teaching at Athena also engender empathetic connections with many of the inmates and allow Vonnegut to use multidirectional memory to associate the Vietnam War with the September 1971 Attica prison revolt. In terms of the latter, Vonnegut uses Hartke’s Vietnam-centered consciousness to

draw parallels between his wartime experiences and the attack on Scipio. Hartke's comments about the overcrowded conditions, racial "color coding," hostage taking, use of New York National Guard troops and helicopters, the governor's role, and even toilet issues all serve to invoke the deadly ve-day insurrection.<sup>23</sup> Vonnegut couples these events to highlight their shared racial, social justice, and military force dimensions as well as to give the Attica conflict greater presence in America's collective memory by associating it with the deeper trauma of Vietnam. Like the bombing of Hiroshima, the scars of Attica must not be forgotten or glossed over.

Even more crucial than merely remembering, however, is the need for empathetic connection. Although Hartke's friendships and imprisonment demonstrate compassion, his tuberculosis offers the strongest proof of meaningful empathetic relationships. We learn that Hartke contracts the disease because he refuses to teach wearing the surgical masks and rubber gloves worn by the other guards at Athena (117). This small gesture of compassion takes on new significance when viewed within one of the novel's central, connective strands, "The Protocols of the Elders of Tralfamadore." This science fiction story imagines that alien "threads of intelligent energy" manipulate human civilization to produce germs horrible and durable enough to enable them to "spread out through the Universe" (199). While generally highlighting a pattern of destructive violence in human history, the story specifically references *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, an anti-Semitic text that helped promote Nazi racial hygiene theories and genocide during the Holocaust. Hartke's refusal to view his Athena students as "germs" challenges the very foundations of this type of racist thinking. Moreover, it results in direct empathetic bonds with the inmates as well as in an intellectual engagement with Debs's principles. Ultimately, Hartke emulates his namesake by becoming a "powerless and despised" (8) prisoner who understands the continued relevance of Debs's famous lines: "While there is a lower class I am in it. While there is a criminal element I am of it. While there is a soul in prison I am not free." (ix)

### **Hope and Helen Dole**

Dubbed "his most depressive" novel (Shields 383),<sup>24</sup> *Hocus Pocus* certainly probes bleak moments in U.S. and world history. However, the darkness in *Hocus Pocus* "is never portrayed as something to which we should succumb." (Davis 127) Vonnegut communicates this message via the character of Dr. Helen Dole. Almost hired to fill Hartke's position teaching physics at Tarkington, Dole challenges the power structures and cultural values that Hartke reveals but cannot totally escape. Born in South Korea and raised in West Berlin, where she later earned a doctorate in

physics, the black, unmarried twenty-six-year-old Dole stumps the fortunetelling powers of the Griot machine and dees the racist “color coding” power structures in the novel. Moreover, Dole directly confronts Tarkington’s trustees, ascribing their power and privilege to traditions of colonialism. She also exemplifies the academic integrity and principles that Hartke is unable to muster during his hearing; she refuses the job because the trustees ask her not to “discuss politics or history or economics or sociology with students.” (282)

the most important aspect of Dole’s challenges to “the ruling class,” however, is her reminder that their values are diametrically opposed to American ideals of democracy, decency, and justice. Although she calls all the trustees “a bunch of European planters” (282) to emphasize their exploitative relationships to their homeland, she specifically singles out Jason Wilder, the character most strongly linked to 1980s neoconservative values, as a target for chastisement. When Wilder dismisses Dole’s charges, stating, “I am an American, not a European.” (285), Dole issues this challenge: “then why don’t you act like one?” (285). Although *Hocus Pocus* primarily locates American ideas of democracy, justice, and equality in historical figures such as Eugene Debs, Abraham Lincoln, and the founders of the Mohiga Valley Free Institute, Dole offers hope for a continuation of those ideals in the present. Her character, more than any other in the novel embodies what Donald Morse has identified as central tenets in Vonnegut’s writings: his arguments “against authoritarianism and in favor of democracy, against military values and in favor of individual freedom, against imparting virtue to the accident of wealth and in favor of radically altering the conditions of the poor.” (4) While Hartke’s experiences expose the multiple personal and cultural traumas of Vietnam and other armed conflicts, Dole’s character gives us a path to move forward.

## Notes

1 All quotations from the novel will be cited parenthetically, using the November 1991 Berkely edition of *Hocus Pocus*.

2 In addition to mentioning the black humor of Smiley’s name, it’s worth noting that the skull is never definitively identified as Letitia’s. Perhaps Vonnegut creates this lack of closure to highlight the recurring nature of trauma. As Cathy Caruth suggests in her seminal work, *Unclaimed Experience*, “trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” such as flashbacks (11). Although the deceased Smiley does not experience moments of trauma, her disembodied skull serves a fitting symbol for the many individual and cultural traumas that are uncovered throughout the novel.



3 Readers interested in viewing the novel through a biographical lens will no doubt find additional layers of meaning in Vonnegut's many autobiographical allusions. As Jerome Klinkowitz, Loree Rackstraw, Gregory Sumner, and other critics have noted, *Hocus Pocus* is filled with references to Vonnegut's fellow Hoosiers, such as writers Booth Tarkington and Dan Wakefield, and dates and places significant to Vonnegut's own life, such as his birth year, 1922, and the allusion to the Orchard School's May pole festivities. Because many of those allusions have been noted elsewhere, they will not play a prominent role in this essay's analysis.

4 See chapter six of Dominick LaCapra's *Writing History, Writing Trauma* for distinctions between these two processes, especially pages 186-87.

5 For discussion of Americans' desire to erase the memory of the Vietnam War, see the prefaces to Anthony Lake's *The Vietnam Legacy* and George Herring's 1979 edition of *America's Longest War*.

6 The full text of Reagan's speech is available online at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum, "Museum, [www.reaganlibrary.archives.gov](http://www.reaganlibrary.archives.gov)."

7 As Mark Taylor observes in *The Vietnam War in History, Literature and Film*, these films along with Reagan's public insistence that American POWs remained in Vietnam was so powerful that in "1993, five years after [Reagan] had left office and twenty years after the last official POW had left North Vietnam, a poll showed that two-thirds of Americans continued to believe that there were still prisoners in Southeast Asia" (142).

8 See pages 137-139 of Morse's *The Novels of Kurt Vonnegut* and chapter fourteen of Vonnegut's *Fates Worse than Death*.

9 Vonnegut even mentions Debs in his final speech, which was delivered posthumously by his son, Dr. Mark Vonnegut, on April 27, 2007 at Clowes Hall in Indianapolis (*Armageddon* 17-18).

10 Marines, not Army personnel, led the evacuation process at the American embassy and the Tan Son Nhut air base. For more detailed discussion of the fall of Saigon and the embassy evacuation, see chapter ten of Weldon Brown's *The Last Chopper*. In addition to referencing the fall of Saigon, Vonnegut might also be alluding to John Kerry's famous testimony before Congress on April 22, 1971, which followed the Winter Soldier Investigation on war crimes in Vietnam. After recalling the atrocities at My Lai and subsequent cover-ups, the falsifications of body counts, the senseless violence of free-fire zones, and many other morally suspect components of the war, Kerry remarked, "We are asking Americans to think about that because how do you ask a man to be the last man to die in Vietnam? How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake?" Although Hartke wasn't the last man to die in Vietnam, his "last man" status and ideas about the war align with Kerry's statements against the conflict. Kerry's full testimony, taken from the Congressional Record (92nd Congress, 1st Session), is available at [www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/pacificviet/kerry.pdf](http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/pacificviet/kerry.pdf).

11 Because other critics have explored Hartke's non-familial relationships with women, I will not analyze them here. For discussion of Hartke's empathetic development via friendships and affairs, see pages 128-30 of Lawrence Broer's *Vonnegut and Hemingway* and page 191 of Susan Farrell's *Critical Companion to Kurt Vonnegut*.

12 For example, the reader learns of Sam Wakefield's job offer to Hartke as early as page six in the novel; however, it isn't until much later that details of that exchange are made clear.

13 Citing a 1996 investigation, Jennifer Price and Susan Stevens note "42% of the 50 Vietnam veterans in their study had engaged in at least one act of violence against their partner during the preceding year, and 92% had committed at least one act of verbal aggression in the preceding year."

14 Vonnegut further reinforces a critique of traditional gender roles by alluding to one of his sister Alice's artistic statements. According to Majie Alford Failey, Alice got in trouble during college for constructing "a huge spider web out of a bed sheet torn into strips...on the landing of her dorm room" (96). Apparently Alice was critiquing the idea that women had been "sent to college to catch a man" (Failey 96).

15 Vonnegut underscores this point and reinforces connections between Jack's heredity insanity and war by directly alluding to General George "Blood and Guts" Patton, famous for his bravado on the battlefield and his insensitivity to psychologically wounded soldiers. Through the references to George S. Patton, Vonnegut invokes one of America's most illustrious military families whose members fought in the Civil War, World War I, World War II, Korea, and Vietnam. Ultimately, Jack Patton's insanity is as inevitable as the real Patton family's service in America's wars.

16 For further discussion of biographical connections in *Hocus Pocus*, see pages 100-104 of Klinkowitz's *Kurt Vonnegut's America*; for an outline of specific Vonnegut essays and speeches referenced in the novel, see page 132 of Klinkowitz's *Vonnegut in Fact*.

17 The choice of crystals as the subject for Hartke's science exhibit is most certainly an allusion to Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*, a novel that underscores both the dangers of military science and the gendered dimensions of scientific research via the character of Felix Hoenikker, the "father" of the atom bomb.

18 Vonnegut reinforces the male power and privilege at the heart of Tarkington in his descriptions of the college's board of trustees: "They were all White, and they were all Male, since Lowell Chung's mother had died of tetanus." (239)

19 Vonnegut most fully explores the importance of extended families in *Slapstick*, but he returns to the idea throughout his career. For an overview of Vonnegut's pre-Timequake statements on extended families, see pages 229-31 of Marc Leeds' *The Vonnegut Encyclopedia*. Vonnegut's 1985 novel, *Galápagos*, not only reduces all of humankind to a single extended family, but it also positions Mary "Mother Nature" Hepburn as its originating matriarch.

20 In an effort to explain why the Tarkington trustees' lives were so valued by the government, Hartke writes, "I think that the number of people with money and power had shrunk to the point where it felt like a family." (275) This vision of a "family" united by shared power and wealth, of course, runs counter to Vonnegut's concept of extended families.

21 I borrow this term loosely from Dominick LaCapra's *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, which explores new historiographical approaches for analyzing "the role of trauma in and across history" (x). Rejecting the extremes of "self sufficient documentary" and "radical constructivism," LaCapra calls for a middle approach that investigates how truth claims "interact, and ought to interact, with other factors or forces—dialogic, performative, rhetorical, ideological, political—in historiography, in other genres, and in hybridized form or modes." (196)

22 Drawing again on Dominick LaCapra's work, I use the term "empathetic unsettlement" to describe the unexpected, personally and culturally unsettling experiences that accompany emotional responses to others' traumatic experiences. According to LaCapra, empathetic unsettlement "poses a barrier to closure in discourse" (41) that prevents false healing and encourages more honest understanding.

23 While there are many excellent resources on the Attica prison insurrection, readers interested in Vonnegut's historical sources should examine Tom Wicker's *A Time to Die*, which Vonnegut evaluated in the March 9, 1975 issue of *The New York Times Book Review*.

24 Shields was not alone in his assessment of *Hocus Pocus*. In his *Entertainment Weekly* review, L.S. Klepp called it "his darkest and bitterest work." John Skow's hasty and negative review for *Time*, meanwhile, said the novel was "a try at prophecy in the darkest and gloomiest sense."

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