

LISA FERGUSON

Killing Them with Kindness: Tim O'Brien's Rehabilitation of the Violent Vietnam Soldier

“He watched her—clean and young, her eyelashes curled like the petals on an orchid. She was fragile. To touch her would risk destroying the whole thing. He did not touch her.” (O'Brien *Going After Cacciato* 74)

“[. . .] there's a bunch of guys in that company want a piece of *that* gook.” (Heinemann *Paco's Story* 175)

Thus far, much of Vietnam War literary criticism has dealt strictly with “warrior masculinities” and the harsh treatment of Vietnamese and American women in some of the war’s most profound fictional works. To enlarge the scope, I wish to briefly acknowledge the Vietnam War’s nonfictional texts (in admittedly general terms) and address a correlation between them and their literary counterparts—specifically how the fine line linking fact and fiction shortens as both describe soldiers’ opinions about and actions towards Vietnamese women. In her article, “‘She’s a Pretty Woman...for a Gook’: The Misogyny of the Vietnam War,” Jacqueline E. Lawson gives perhaps the most concise analysis regarding soldiers’ degrading perceptions and abuses of Vietnamese women during the war as portrayed in major nonfictional accounts. First, she tackles the war’s rape phenomenon (which she finds blatantly visible in various texts) by immediately rejecting the commonly accepted theory that the war is to blame: “War does not create misogynists. Neither does ‘it’ create rapists, racists,

mass murderers, or criminals” (17). Instead, Lawson suggests that American society itself promotes a “predisposition to misogyny” (17), and concludes that “a culture that regards sex and violence as entertainment, aggressiveness as a virtue, and women as objects to be leered at, peered at, commercialized, and commodified should not be surprised when its soldiers go off to war and commit atrocities against women” (18). Moreover, Lawson holds the armed forces largely responsible for perpetuating such brutality and sexism among America’s young and impressionable, asserting that the “fear of emasculation is exploited most effectively by the military, whose job it is to turn ‘boys’ into ‘men’” (19). Lawson documents her article with emasculating tirades of former drill sergeants that veterans remembered and recorded in their works, which she claims were meant to shape, mold, and ultimately coerce America’s best and brightest into killing machines that feared nothing, except becoming “pussies.” Lawson then juxtaposes these lines with troubling and graphic passages from the autobiographical writings of selected Vietnam veterans, in which the vets claim to have actively participated in or passively witnessed the rape and torture of numerous Vietnamese women. Thus, Lawson investigates, strictly by way of veterans’ personal writings, how the practices and beliefs of a misogynistic American/military culture essentially spilled over onto Vietnam’s indigenous female population, with disastrous effects.

What is noteworthy for my purposes is that aside from memoirs and oral histories, Lawson oddly neglects to add the vital category of Vietnam War fiction to her working list of “documented atrocities” (19). In his article, “Sexism and Racism in Vietnam War Fiction,” Phillip K. Jason notes that the very stereotypes and sexual violence Lawson finds throughout the war’s nonfiction run just as prevalently and possibly more vividly in veterans’ fictional works, which he asserts have a “greater obligation to *truth* than to fact” (emphasis added 126). Although veteran authors such as Larry Heinemann and Tim O’Brien have conceded that their novels are *not* strictly first-hand accounts of their war experiences, they nevertheless maintain that their writings are experientially “true” and authentic, and completely indicative of everything they and their war buddies witnessed and endured for one hellish year of their lives. Accordingly, numerous Vietnam veterans (most notably Heinemann) have accurately captured and brutally displayed the disturbing rape factor of the Vietnam War via their novels, poetry, or plays.

Still, Lawson’s discoveries essentially buttress Jason’s point. For instance, Lawson attributes the abundant number of rapes she finds cited throughout servicemen’s recollections to the American GI’s overwhelming fear of emasculation. Unable to confidently solidify his manhood on the battlefield or his country’s collective maleness

in the larger world arena, she attests that the combat soldier turned his anger to the thing he feared most, the feminine side of himself, and the physical embodiment of the feminine that he so loathed. As a result, “raping a Vietnamese woman became a hallmark of the guerrilla phase of the war,” a rite of passage one must complete to confirm his manhood and show solidarity to his fellow soldiers (Lawson 25). (For a more detailed conversation about this topic, see Susan Jeffords’ *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War*).

However, an example of this problem, not coincidentally, is most graphically displayed in Heinemann’s second and deeply unsettling work of fiction, *Paco’s Story* (1979). The permanently injured Vietnam veteran, Paco, sits alone in his dingy hotel room and remembers in gruesome detail the gang rape of the Vietnamese girl who killed two members of his platoon and was subsequently deemed a “hardcore VC” by his “macho” sergeant, Gallagher. After the men subdue and bind the girl, Gallagher attempts to corral and reassure the collective in the way to which they have grown accustomed:

[. . .] Gallagher stepped up behind her, between her feet, unbuttoned his fly, and eased out his cock. He leaned on her hard, James, rubbing himself up a fine hard-on, and slipped it into her. Then he commenced to fuck her, hard, pressing his big meaty hand into the middle of her back. [. . .] And when Gallagher finished, Jonesy fucked her, and when Jonesy was done, half the fucking company was standing in line and commenced to fuck her ragged. [. . .] Dudes still ambled over to the doorway to watch, to call out coaching, taking their turns, hanging around the side of the building after—some getting back in line. (180-181)

Even more than the protagonist’s horrendous physical injury and difficult post-war adjustment upon which the vast majority of the novel centers, I would propose this single event, the rape of “*that* gook,” remains the hidden core of Paco’s “story,” the one episode he “cannot choose but remember” (174) because the incident visits him in fitful dreams and seeps into his lethargic waking hours. Consequently, this passage perfectly encapsulates Lawson’s premise, the combat soldier’s disdain and disgust for the Vietnamese woman during the Vietnam War, prompted by an all-consuming fear of the woman using her alleged sexual and military prowess to render the American soldier impotent in the eyes of the world. This scene is one of many, in a myriad of war fiction, which reveals an atrocious rape and subsequent murder of a Vietnamese woman at the hands of America’s “best and brightest,” often the novel’s “protagonist”—

and perhaps some of his closest buddies. Fiction or nonfiction, the writings to come out of the war thus prove that when it comes to rape and brutality, many veterans can recall the same (and “true”) horrendous stories.

I

Nonetheless, amidst the deep body of sexually explicit and violent images inundating the large majority of Vietnam War literature, one text stands abruptly out from the rest. Tim O’Brien’s *Going After Cacciato* (1978) does not include the obligatory “rape scene” involving the protagonist, his platoon, and the token Asian female soldier/whore. Instead, the beleaguered soldier in this novel, Paul Berlin, attempts to vent his pent-up frustrations via a seemingly loving and tender relationship with an “innocent” and “pure” Asian *girl*, Sarkin. O’Brien therefore seems to move away from what Lawson suggests was the all too realistic view and treatment of Asian women during the Vietnam War, a view which eventually worked its way into the narratives, memoirs, and fiction of veterans, and towards America’s perception of Vietnam and Vietnamese women long before our military entanglement. In this study I seek to explore *why* this shift occurred, to uncover the specific reason that O’Brien takes an intentional step backwards to the benevolent perception of Asian women pre-Vietnam—and to determine whether or not the move ultimately benefited his fictional soldier in terms of his war experience and its lingering aftermath.

First, however, we must discover from where O’Brien obtained *his* ideas about “good” Asian women and on whom or what he may have based his female character. In his largely unrelated but often quoted article, “Men, Women, and Vietnam,” Milton J. Bates seems to have unwittingly stumbled upon a likely suspect. While briefly summarizing America’s impression of Vietnam and Vietnamese women both pre and post-conflict, Bates uses the particular representation embodied in Graham Greene’s fragile Vietnamese beauty, Phuong (love interest to Alden Pyle in Greene’s unforgettable novel, *The Quiet American*), as a central point of reference. Phuong serves as his “pre-American-war” example, and he then juxtaposes Pyle’s opinion of her and her country against the American soldiers’ views of Asian women and Vietnam during the actual Vietnam War:

When Vietnam was still part of French Indochina, Graham Greene implies in *The Quiet American* (1955), American counter-insurgency experts regarded the colony in much the way Alden Pyle sees Phuong: compliant, childlike, and eminently available. [. . .] American soldiers of the sixties saw a less delicate, less mandarin Vietnam, though her gender remained the same. She

was the VC prostitute in the local Dogpatch who waited for GIs with razor blades concealed in her vagina. (36)

In light of this change in America's perception, and how the change manifested itself in soldiers' attitudes during the war, O'Brien's aforementioned novel not only takes on crucial import and significance (for its deviation from traditional Vietnam War texts), but it also evidently draws many inspirations from Greene's earlier work. Due to the notable similarities soon to be discussed between Greene's *Phuong* and O'Brien's *Sarkin Aung Wan*, one can arguably conclude that O'Brien intentionally seeks to revive or reclaim Greene's once beloved character (or her *type*). In so doing, O'Brien also resurrects, by way of his respective soldier, Paul Berlin, a "different" kind of American masculinity reminiscent of Alden Pyle—fully equipped with his naiveté, good intentions, and misconceived notions about Vietnamese women and their country.

Accordingly, Berlin's relationship with the *new* and *improved* Asian lover mimics *Phuong's* and *Pyle's* coupling, which, of course, despite the fairy-tale ambience, ends badly. Like Pyle, Berlin attributes to his imaginary girlfriend notions of ignorance and purity that are incomparable to the real woman herself. Not only do *Phuong* and *Sarkin* need neither saving nor protecting, as the young Americans vehemently believe, but each woman also uses her alleged credulity and presumed innocence to her advantage. Each man subsequently fails to predict the eventual behavior of his Asian "girl" because he undermines her *true* independence, intelligence, and sexuality, which inevitably surface at the height of the protagonist's turmoil (when he seeks to "marry" the girl, when he thinks of turning away from his war "for" her, when he achieves the "pinnacle" of his love for her). The soldier who lives long enough to witness this betrayal ends up disillusioned and alone; the patriot who dies with his preconceived notions never truly knows the woman he so ardently claims to love.

Why, then, do the men in these novels cling to the idea of an innocent and untainted Asian girl, in desperate need of an American's protection? Because the perception allows them to cling to the innocent and untainted part of themselves; and this in turn permits, I argue, the authors of these masculinist texts to basically "rehabilitate" the Vietnam veteran, to undo the damage of the perception one would derive from reading Lawson's essay and the works she cites, as well as any number of fictional texts to come out of the war. O'Brien and his character therefore have a vested interest in "reclaiming" *Phuong*; only if the Asian woman fits the mold can this rehabilitation take place. In the end, however, I will show how the "pure" and "good" Asian woman cannot ultimately live up to Berlin's expectations, for he cannot completely unravel

the prejudices in which his war has him entangled, which prevent 1955 Phuong from ever existing for the lowly GI (nor did she ever really exist for Pyle). Hence, even though O'Brien's fictional soldier attempts to revive Phuong with the express purpose of reviving the innocence, courage, and patriotism within himself, his woman will do an abrupt about-face and reinforce the perception of the Asian woman *during* the Vietnam War—one who uses her sexuality and wiles to entice and then betray the all-trusting American. The veteran, though, still gains the reader's sympathy, for he never seeks vengeance for the woman's purported wrongdoing. Frightened and disheartened, he manages to remain worlds away from the mental image of Lawson's and Heinemann's sexual sadists.

II

Although Greene's novel has continually garnered attention from war historians and followers of international affairs, in 2007 it experienced a surge in popularity by way of then president George W. Bush. While giving a speech at the National Convention of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, Bush said the following:

The argument that America's presence in Indochina was dangerous had a long pedigree. In 1955, long before the United States had entered the war, Graham Greene wrote a novel called, "The Quiet American." It was set in Saigon, and the main character was a young government agent named Alden Pyle. He was a symbol of American purpose and patriotism -- and dangerous naivete. Another character describes Alden this way: "I never knew a man who had better motives for all the trouble he caused." (www.PresidentialRhetoric.com)

While Bush was attempting to speak to the dangers of American forces leaving Iraq too soon, as well as the power of good intentions, reporters were quick to point out that his reference had quite the opposite effect. Joseph Pearce of *The American Conservative* remarked that "Bush's unexpected sortie into the fictional world of Greene was itself dangerously naive, especially as several commentators had already suggested that Bush is little more than a real-life incarnation of Alden Pyle" (25+). But Bush clearly likened himself to Pyle's supposed morals and values—the very things that made Pyle "all-American." And, coincidentally, he harkens back to a more fixed American (and particularly masculine) identity at a time when both were and still are in a state of flux. The uncertainty and violence brought about at the height of the Vietnam War—the pictures of flag-draped coffins, the images of the battlefield's slain and injured illuminating our nightly dinners—are years away. For Alden Pyle,

America is a Camelot, and he a modern day Lancelot who will rescue the Vietnamese with the might of his sword, backed by little more than his unshakeable faith. And Bush was intensely attracted to this idea: faith surmounting what everyone declared to be insurmountable.

As Bush quickly learned, however, one cannot summon the memory of Alden Pyle in a vacuum, for his name carries loaded implications about man, country, patriotism, honor—even romance. To truly understand the many facets of Phuong's reinvention in O'Brien's novel, how her mere presence magically permits the author to successfully rehabilitate the "combat grunt," one must first revisit Graham Greene's well-intentioned, ever so quiet American and briefly view her through his eyes, to see her *exactly* as he sees her. And, although Pyle is described strictly through the eyes of the biased, jaded, and cynical Thomas Fowler, the reporter nonetheless offers enough glimpses of the American's interaction with Phuong to more than adequately reveal the depth of Pyle's illusions. From the first contact to the last, Pyle makes perfectly clear that Phuong needs rescuing, that *he* will rescue Phuong, and that Phuong will be a better person for it. In actuality, however, Phuong is a savvy and sometimes manipulative "adult" woman, and Pyle, in many ways, chooses to save her to feel better about himself, even if he does not recognize his real motives. In order for Pyle to "liberate" Phuong, though, she must take on the persona of a defenseless, helpless victim, which is why he both physically and mentally recreates her in this false image.

When Pyle first sees Phuong having dinner with Fowler at the Grand Monde, he is noticeably affected and impressed by her beauty, but even more so by her alleged weakness and frailty. Phuong's sister, who immediately detects the foreigner's interest, tries to sell Pyle on the idea of Phuong's "old-fashioned" Vietnamese ways, feeding into the Western mythology of Asian women: "'She is delicate. [. . .] She needs care. She deserves care. She is very, very loyal'" (Greene 42). At this moment, Phuong's sister knowingly packages Phuong to fit Pyle's idea of a "typical" Vietnamese woman, and Pyle proves moments later that he has bought her pitch when he sheepishly asks Phuong for a dance, and then proceeds to hold her gingerly, awkwardly, "so far away from him that [one] expected him at any moment to sever contact" (40). Phuong is hence not a sexual being to be used at his disposal, but a childlike girl who needs protection from such advances. In fact, Pyle tries to shield Phuong's innocent eyes moments later when things become too randy at the Grand Monde, and Fowler is shocked by the "sudden violence" in the quiet American's voice when he insists that Phuong must leave: "Fowler, [. . .] let's go. We've had enough, haven't we? This isn't a bit suitable for *her*" (45). Although Pyle later learns that Phuong used to work at this questionable place, he simply cannot fathom that she could (willingly) be part of such a life. He convinces

himself that she once resorted to this way of living out of desperation, and that he will be the man who can help her escape from her situation, to assure that she never has to sell dances to “horny” foreigners ever again.

While contemplating the pitfalls of Phuong’s allegedly bleak life, Pyle inevitably decides that Fowler, the married British reporter who refuses to divorce his wife and make an honest woman out of Phuong, must be dealt with, for he sullies the girl’s reputation by keeping her as his “mistress” (and, more importantly, sullies the pure image of her that Pyle has created in his mind). Pyle eventually decides that Phuong must be taken away from Fowler altogether (for her *protection*, of course) as he admittedly uses Phuong for sex and security, not love. As Pyle chivalrously relays his wishes to the shocked Fowler, he tells him that he made this decision the night that Fowler took him to the local brothel: “You know, I think it was seeing all those girls in that house. They were so pretty. Why, she might have been one of them. I wanted to protect her” (58). Pyle never considers that selling dances at the Grand Monde is only a few steps away (figuratively and literally) from the neighborhood whorehouse, and that Phuong had sold services (of some sort) to foreign men from a very young age. Phuong had furthermore participated in this behavior long before Fowler met her. Nonetheless, Pyle sees Fowler as Phuong’s biggest risk factor; if she remains with the reporter, he will surely lead her down the road to whoredom.

In fact, when Pyle comes to Fowler’s shabby apartment to plead his case to Phuong, he treats her like the reporter’s captive rather than his adult girlfriend, a helpless hostage whose ransom he has come to delicately negotiate. In his article “The Quiet American and the Novel,” Douglas Kerr notes that Pyle’s self appointed savior role stems from his inability to understand who Phuong is as a person, and he “attempts to fill this cognitive emptiness by projecting a romantic narrative in which Phuong is a helpless childish innocent and he the heroic rescuer” (95). Indeed, as Pyle sits at the table to discuss with Fowler the terms and conditions of the girl’s release, he has the reporter translate what he believes any Asian woman in a war-torn country could possibly want from an American like him: “Tell her I don’t expect her to love me right away. That will come in time, but tell her what I offer is security and respect. That doesn’t sound very exciting, but perhaps it’s better than passion” (78). Fowler is thoroughly unconvinced that Phuong wants “American” protection, but, as Kerr argues, the language barrier prevents Fowler from truly understanding her any better than Pyle: “For her inner life is a blind spot to these Western men, a linguistically impenetrable hinterland that is beyond representation” (95+). Both men have their narratives where Phuong is concerned; Fowler’s role in his is just as contrived and self-serving as Pyle’s. Moreover, as Zadie Smith mentioned in her article “Shades of Greene,”

both men's narratives end up being "unavoidably colonial." Therefore, as a "colonial" protector, Pyle is so determined to shelter his little Vietnamese girl from Fowler's (the enemy's) manipulative clutches that he never contemplates what part Phuong plays in her supposed imprisonment. Yet, Pyle cannot afford to face the truth. If he "saves" Phuong, he will prove to himself that Vietnamese women (and their country) need him; his theories, his passion for York Harding, and the work he is doing in country will suddenly be validated. If he fails, if Phuong is just a woman who is more than content to remain in a sexual relationship with a married man, then he becomes an unwelcome intrusion, throwing her life into unnecessary turmoil for his own pleasure. Pyle essentially "needs" Phuong to be chaste and pure so his intentions can remain "good" and honorable, both in his life and in his war.

While Pyle claims to want to save Phuong from a life of poverty, mistreatment, neglect, and war, the more he reveals about his desires (and the more he insists on taking her away from her live-in lover) the more evident it becomes that he specifically wants to save her from her sexuality. Pyle consequently always prefers to see Phuong as he did the first night at the Grande Monde—virginal and delicate—even when common sense consistently tells him that she is neither. After Pyle is fully aware of Phuong and Fowler's sexual relationship, for example, he still refers to Phuong as a "fresh flower" (102), implying her newness, her vitality—that she has yet to be plucked or become overgrown. Fowler, of course, warns Pyle that "a lot of weeds" (102) have indeed overtaken Phuong's pretty little petals. But Fowler's consistent portrayal of Phuong as the extreme opposite of Pyle's impression is also disingenuous, for, as Smith attests, "[Fowler's] protection of Phuong against Pyle's idea of her leads him into new caricatures of his own." And one of Fowler's caricatures consists of Phuong as a girl in a "bubble," mindlessly flipping through pretty Western magazines and blissfully indifferent to the "manly" political movements occurring outside of her protected dome. In his article, "The Quiet American Revisited: Orientalism Reconsidered," Edward Palm says that "Fowler's [repeated] characterization of Phuong as lacking the 'gift of expression' is no better than Pyle's insistence on her childlike simplicity as a widely shared cultural trait among the Vietnamese." Additionally, because Fowler always communicated with Phuong in "the language of the colonizer" he was never able to shake the "presumption of the inferiority of Vietnamese language and culture [. . .]." As a result, to him she remained an unenlightened "other," and consequently unknowable. Both Pyle and the reporter are driving blind—and they constantly veer off course when describing Phuong because they cannot see the real Phuong, only a rough outline of who they have written her to be.

But Pyle lacks Fowler's modicum of self-awareness, as he chooses to ignore Fowler's comments and instead dons the guise of a protective, controlling father. Phuong apparently needs "saving" from perverts in whorehouses and hotels, from dirty old men like Fowler, who Pyle claims will "'just keep her as a comfortable lay until [he] leave[s]" (133). Pyle assumes that Phuong could have no desire for this arrangement; devoid of heat, passion, or desire, she evidently only agrees to sex in return for the miniscule stability Fowler can offer. Furthermore, Pyle never considers lovers who came before Fowler, thus stripping Phuong of any kind of sexual history. As a result, even after Pyle "frees" Phuong from the gentle bindings of her suppressor, she will never fully meet his expectations, for he will simply take Fowler's place.

Pyle predictably becomes uncomfortable after he gets the girl and moves her into his home, as they essentially copy the "sinful," detested arrangement that she had with Fowler. When Fowler asks Pyle whether he has given his live-in girlfriend the marriage he promised, Pyle is clearly embarrassed and somewhat repulsed by his admission: "'No.' He blushed [. . .]. As a matter of fact I'm hoping to get special leave. Then we could get married at home—properly'" (155). Pyle is ashamed of "playing house" with Phuong because this makes him just like Fowler, and if he is Fowler, then Phuong suddenly loses some of her cherished innocence and purity; if Phuong is "tainted," then his own personal integrity becomes an issue. One suspects that the relationship is well on its way to unraveling, even before Pyle's murder, and this suspicion is corroborated by the events that follow Pyle's untimely death. The morning after Pyle's murder, Phuong returns to the arms of her former lover, seemingly unaffected by her quiet American's demise, and presumably concerned only with the Western marriage that she finally will be granted—it makes little difference to whom. When Fowler hesitantly questions Phuong's feelings for the now dead American, who was so clearly taken with her, Phuong pretends that the incident is already forgotten:

Do you miss him much?

Who?

Pyle.

[. . .] Can I go please? My sister will be so excited [about the engagement].

You spoke his name once in your sleep.

I never remember my dreams (189).

Phuong ostensibly switches her allegiance back to the man who can give her what she wants. Fowler recalls a time when Pyle claimed the crass reporter did not understand Phuong, which leads Fowler to rhetorically ask the dead American, "And did you

understand her either? Could you have anticipated this situation? Phuong so happily asleep beside me and you dead?” (60). But Fowler has no idea if Phuong is “happily” slumbering beside him, or what her reasons for coming back to him are. Ultimately, neither man knew Phuong because the real Phuong was impenetrable to either man’s invading narrative. However, the reader certainly knows that Alden Pyle would be heartbroken if he had lived to see her back in the arms of Fowler, and that’s enough for many of us to forget about Pyle’s questionable intentions, “all the trouble he caused,” and remember him only for his “better motives.”

III

In 1968, thirteen years after Pyle and Phuong shared their memorable dance at the Grande Monde, Alden Pyle is long dead and Phuong is long gone—but apparently both are not forgotten. Although Paul Berlin, O’Brien’s humble foot soldier in *Cacciato*, comes to Vietnam at the height of combat, he nonetheless rediscovers Phuong in another Vietnamese beauty, Sarkin Aung Wan, and subsequently breathes renewed life into the dead economic attaché. In short, the reader gets to witness Greene’s former storyline played out once more. Nevertheless, there is a catch: Sarkin is not a “real” person in the text, but Berlin’s fictionalized, over-sketched daydream. He “dreams” the girl while he “dreams” that his platoon chases an AWOL soldier, *Cacciato*, all the way to Paris. Berlin’s creation accompanies the group on their imaginary journey, strangely playing as important of a part in Berlin’s mind as each of his men—who happen to be based on *real* people in the young man’s life. Yet Berlin never meets a real Vietnamese woman after whom Sarkin could be remotely fashioned. One must instantly question, therefore, *why* Berlin creates Sarkin (i.e. recreates Phuong) at all.

In her book *Friendly Fire: American Images of the Vietnam War*, Katherine Kinney suggests that Berlin invents Sarkin in essence to reinvent himself. She argues that if Berlin manages to form a loving connection with a young and innocent Vietnamese girl in the midst of the turmoil that surrounds him (killing, rape, gore, etc.) then “he is no longer an alien presence, a soldier, an embodiment of a national and imperial identity, but a lover, a man, an individual,” one who can easily “declare his separation from the war” (57) and its harmful effects. Kinney’s assessment, of course, is correct—it only needs to be put into a larger framework. By forming a kind and loving relationship with Sarkin, Berlin will essentially form a singular identity separate from the violence and sexual aggression of the all-powerful and all-consuming military and male collective. If Berlin manages to shield himself from what Lawson and many other critics pointed out was the army’s steady diet of sex and violence, then O’Brien effectively rewrites

the legacy of the stereotypical Vietnam combat soldier. Hence, Sarkin Aung Wan is born—or, more precisely, Phuong is reborn.

For Berlin to be a “good” guy who treats his young Vietnamese creation with dignity and respect, however, he must first assure that she shares no commonalities with the real women he might encounter in Vietnam. Berlin consequently creates in his mind not *just* an innocent young girl lacking basic sexual urges (which is simple enough), but an actual refugee: helpless, defenseless, exposed, and in dire need of saving. Her incredible set of circumstances, of course, should forever motivate Berlin to abstain from taking advantage of her (which would ruin everything). In fact, according to Kinney, Berlin and Sarkin’s relationship is at first defined by the unusual absence of *all* sexual activity, not only by the fact that they obviously do not “fuck,” but also that they do little else (57). Berlin and Sarkin spend the vast majority of the novel holding hands, taking long walks, having dinner, and going shopping, much like two wholesome teenagers in the beginning stages of courtship, possibly being chaperoned by one or more of their parents. Consistent with Pyle’s feelings about Phuong, Berlin is thus not interested in using Sarkin for a one night stand and would be offended by the thought of anyone treating her so callously. If Berlin or any of his cohorts were to sleep with Sarkin, she would cease being the fresh, blooming flower, the potential love interest, and would transform into the “gook” whore—causing Berlin to turn into the dreaded oversexed “grunt.” As a result, Berlin imagines Sarkin exactly the way in which Pyle envisions Phuong: beautiful, childlike, loyal, innocent, naïve, gentle, and in desperate need of the protection of a big, strong, exceedingly “good” American.

Like Pyle, Berlin sees his crush as more child than adult, and moreover uses her youthful appearance to uphold her chaste image. When Berlin first imagines Sarkin, he envisions “a girl, not a woman,” who could be anywhere from “twelve” to “twenty-one” (O’Brien 51). Berlin soon lowers his estimation even more, and as the text progresses Sarkin seems to decrease in age. Berlin eventually admits that Sarkin is altogether “much too young” (53)—although he never articulates what she is much too young “for.” The clear implication, of course, is that Sarkin is “too young” for Berlin’s sexual advances, just as Phuong was too young for Fowler’s. Berlin moreover agrees with his lieutenant that Sarkin does not belong in their world of masculine warfare, that “[the men] could not be burdened by weakness or frailty” (59) in their hunt for Cacciato. Berlin’s beliefs thus mirror Pyle’s, in that Pyle thought Phuong had little to no knowledge of the war that waged all around her and could not be trusted to protect herself. Sarkin, however, exhibits a solid comprehension of her situation. When Berlin initially tells the girl that she cannot accompany them on their recovery mission, she asks Berlin to feel her muscles and whispers sweet encouragements into his ear: “You

can persuade your lieutenant. [. . .] Tell him of my strength, so that I may join you to Paris” (60). Berlin, believing Sarkin to be “fragile” and “delicate” (60), finally decides that he must take her with his platoon to protect her—she will see Paris after all.

Sarkin travels and camps with Berlin and his men for many weeks, tempting Berlin to do certain things he knows she is “too young” to do. Nevertheless, despite his strong attraction, Berlin refuses to act on his urges and turn Sarkin into another sex object. To help uphold her pure image in his mind, Berlin watches the girl while she sleeps, during which she seems powerless, feeble, childlike, and innocent: “He watched her—clean and young, her eyelashes curled like the petals on an orchid. She was fragile. To touch her would risk destroying the whole thing. He did not touch her” (74). The “whole thing” that would be destroyed upon intercourse is Berlin’s creation. Sarkin would no longer be Sarkin, but an unnamed “gook,” or maybe a VC prostitute with a booby-trapped vagina. Berlin consequently would no longer be Berlin, but an extension of his misogynistic collective. Due to the delicate balancing act, then, the GI must work diligently to maintain Sarkin’s childlike innocence. He shows her happily playing, stretching, yawning, exercising—and consistently evokes images of a toddler after she has been bathed, awakened from a nap, or simply cooing from contentment (175). He speaks of and about Sarkin almost as if he is her father (much like Pyle spoke of Phuong), hence moving him (and her) as far away as possible from a sexual relationship.

Nevertheless, although Berlin loves to enjoy Sarkin’s childish qualities, he also derives hidden pleasure from placing her in the stereotypical (and rather risky) role of the pleasing, smiling, and accommodating Asian female. Often, during Sarkin’s waking hours, Berlin would safely daydream (within his daydream) about her more womanly and “agreeable” side. And, because Sarkin had a habit of grooming herself around the other men, Berlin had ample opportunity to indulge himself: “He watched as she spread out her blanket, removed her sandals, brushed her hair, stretched, yawned, lay back. He liked this. He liked it when she smiled at him, nodding slightly, smoothing her robes about her legs” (54). Sarkin’s nodding and smiling suggest not only sweetness and purity, but also submission and compliance—a dangerous mix, but one Berlin can still enjoy guilt-free. Although Berlin will not sleep with her, he creates a girl in Sarkin that *would* welcome his (and presumably only his) advances.

Berlin can apparently only feel competent and self-assured, however, at the expense of reducing Sarkin to two very restricted roles: childish virgin or the silent, eager-to-please woman of the Orient. Berlin therefore creates Sarkin to be such a weak, dutiful, *and* virtuous girl that it becomes incredibly easy for Sarkin to shift back and forth between the two categories, causing some unwanted friction in this otherwise “chaste” relationship. For instance, in return for Berlin’s unequivocal kindness and protection,

Sarkin begins to routinely dote on him, just as he assumes a skittish Vietnamese refugee would. At night, Sarkin even touches him—she douses Berlin’s wounds with alcohol, bathes him, and then lathers his sore and exhausted body with oils and creams (115). Katherine Kinney asserts that these particular evenings prove that Berlin’s perception of Sarkin “always verges on the idealized, transnational, and transhistorical Western fantasy of the Asian woman as supreme servant, the ‘geisha’” (57-58), despite his otherwise honorable intentions. Berlin has unwittingly opened a door he wanted to keep forever sealed—if Sarkin becomes the token Asian Geisha then her “virginity” becomes an “act.” She *is* a sexual being who only *appears* chaste for the purpose of attracting and stimulating the object of her affection.

Because Berlin nevertheless views Sarkin in this way with increasing frequency, she quickly changes temperaments; the once fragile and loving girl suddenly comes across as shallow, ignorant, and fickle when it comes to issues that should move her deeply. For example, when she is confronted with an opportunity to go to America, she shows no qualms about leaving a lifetime of ancestral history behind. Berlin imagines that his Vietnamese refugee longs to drop everything she has ever known and blissfully head West, and Sarkin indeed becomes elated at the knowledge that the troop is possibly going all the way to Paris: “Paris! Churches and museums! Notre-Dame! Oh, I should dearly like to be a refugee in Paris” (58). Much like Pyle, Berlin imagines that Sarkin’s ultimate desire in life is to leave Vietnam, no matter the circumstance or the emotional/personal cost. Though Sarkin’s aunts have recently died in an explosion, and she has lost the remnants of an already disintegrated family, Sarkin seems completely and totally unaffected by her supposedly crippling loss, and this is again an instance in which an American strips a Vietnamese woman of any meaningful past. As an Asian woman, Berlin sees her as a “lesser,” an “other,” someone who wouldn’t be forever impacted by losing her entire family to war—as an American obviously would. In fact, she shamelessly leeches on to Berlin when she realizes that he is her one way ticket out of Vietnam, and not so subtly hints that “perhaps [they] shall fall in love” if he takes her along for the ride (58). Berlin obviously feels that he, the protective American, is all the family she could possibly need, and he never considers that he wants to uproot and implant the girl into a world in which she does not belong. At this point, he does not even realize that Sarkin’s desires speak directly to her selfishness (i.e. her untrustworthiness).

Despite the fact that Berlin puts so much effort into creating Sarkin exactly the way he wishes, then, the further he delves into his creation, the more he lets down his guard, and the more things expectedly begin to crumble. Throughout the novel, Sarkin slowly evolves from a completely agreeable and complaint little girl to an independent,

argumentative, and demanding young woman. For instance, when Berlin seems less than positive about the prospects of ever reaching Paris, Sarkin suavely takes on the persona of a sullen child, knowing this tactic will serve her purposes best: “He watched as she went to the window, her back to him. [. . .] She was sobbing” (115). Sarkin will not cry for her dead aunts, yet she can muster up tears when Berlin seems wishy-washy about his commitment to take her West, prompting him to make “amends and promises,” which includes touring the museums and buying Sarkin all “those pretty windowed things” (115). As his imaginative power slips, Sarkin uses her power of manipulation to overtake the relationship. The couple’s bond becomes especially strained whenever Berlin fears that he may not deliver all the things he has been forced to pledge. At this point, Sarkin successfully causes him to feel inadequate about his ability to protect her and to satisfy her needs. Instead of remaining the beautiful, innocent refugee, who needed nothing but love and shelter, she becomes spoiled and dissatisfied, with a list of needs that go well beyond the basics of survival. She has consequently stepped out of 1955 and moved closer to the Vietnam combat soldier’s present perception.

Yet, when Berlin’s platoon and Sarkin finally get close to Paris, one might expect that the GI would be able to tweak Sarkin’s character “back” to docile and adoring. Nevertheless, the relationship shows even more significant signs of slippage. In Delhi, the two have little conversation, for O’Brien notes that in the mornings they would routinely “watch the rain from the lobby windows [and] [sit] quietly [. . .]. Sometimes they shopped for clothing or jewelry or special face creams” (169). As with Pyle and Phuong’s language barrier, Sarkin and Berlin evidently do not have a real verbal connection. While the scenes O’Brien describes between the two seem serene and calm (Sarkin does seem virginal again, after all), in reality all the window shopping, hand holding, and long, silent walks show the true superficiality of their connection. The relationship should be progressing, but is stalling due to his ultimate failure to imagine it properly. For fear of turning Sarkin into a whore, Berlin cannot sleep with her; yet Berlin and Sarkin do eventually kiss, and Berlin often imagines “within” his daydream that they have intercourse, which means he cannot transform her into a little girl again, either. Herein lies Berlin’s true inadequacy, his monumental “failure of imagination.” Berlin assumes that Americanizing Sarkin can take away all her (and his) ills. When Sarkin speaks of all the wonderful things they can do in the West, such as “start a restaurant, or maybe a beautician’s parlor on the Right Bank,” Berlin feels comfortable and competent, “and it was then that he most liked to touch her” (170). However, touching Sarkin also ruins *everything*—Berlin cannot find a balance.

In her article “Just a Creature of His Own Making? Metafiction, Identification, and Gender in *Going After Cacciato*,” Anne-Marie Womack suggests that Berlin’s

struggle to properly imagine Berlin for an extended period of time stems directly from the blurring of gender roles in his mind, for Sarkin *is* Berlin—and Berlin is Sarkin. Rather than following the traditional idea of a Vietnam combat soldier ‘rejecting the feminine,’ Womack believes that O’Brien rejects the particular premise of the Vietnam soldier expunging all things feminine. Thus

The novel both reproduces and undermines claims about gender and war as it attempts to come to terms with the masculine identity through a female figure. Not merely restoring the masculine, Wan often forces overlapping and fluid categories that resist Berlin’s control and so demonstrates how the process of cross-gender identification can work in complex ways to disrupt a transparent development of gender identity. (826)

Womack is certainly correct in her claim that Berlin has great difficulty controlling his Asian woman, and her body does become “militarized” throughout their journey showing that Sarkin is not in the helpless “damsel in distress” role for long. Nevertheless, the undercurrent to their entire relationship is the fear of the deceit, which, in this context, seems very gender-fixed. In Vietnam War fiction the American soldier habitually worries about being betrayed by either the Vietnamese woman in front of him, or the American woman behind him back home (the latter of which being a theme O’Brien has visited repeatedly). Additionally, the Vietnamese woman’s betrayal can carry a sentence much heavier than a broken heart—it can carry emotional impotence and literal death. The fear of it is much more palpable, and the unraveling of Berlin’s daydream comes with an impending sense of doom.

Unsurprisingly, Sarkin begins to transfer her affections when she senses Berlin’s inability to give her what she wants. The little things Sarkin once happily did for Berlin, she now does for the much older lieutenant, under the pretext of nursing the ill man back to health. Initially, Berlin believes that Sarkin’s concern for the lieutenant is a wonderful thing, “like a daughter caring for an ailing father” (256), and he admires the relationship that the two form: “[. . .] she encouraged him to eat and exercise, coddled him, scolded him [. . .] she would take the old man’s hand and press it between hers and begin talking of the lovely things they would see in Paris” (256). Berlin does not realize until it is far too late that he fashions Sarkin’s and the lieutenant’s relationship after his own relationship with the young refugee, at least as it was in the honeymoon stage. Like Pyle, he does not comprehend how a young, vibrant woman could love a much older man. Eventually, Berlin senses that something has gone terribly wrong, and he begins to question Sarkin’s intentions, unable to come up with the specific details that

are integral to her continued existence in his mind: “Her own motives were secret. What did she want? Refuge, as sought by refugees, or escape, as sought by victims? It was impossible to tell” (256). The impossibility of *correctly* creating Sarkin forever bothers Berlin. Just as he does not understand the motivations of the real Vietnamese women who surround him, he also cannot relate to his own creation. Although Berlin created Sarkin to feel better about his role as a man and a soldier, she simply serves as more evidence of his supposed shortcomings in both areas.

Once in Paris, however, and despite the warning signs, Berlin desperately tries to convince himself that all is well with Sarkin, especially now that he has given Sarkin the life she allegedly wants. Berlin furthermore says that he and the young girl “touched in ways they hadn’t touched before” (294). Apparently, now that he has granted Sarkin’s ultimate wish, he believes he is safe to act on his physical desires (as did Pyle with *Phuong*). Unfortunately, just like Pyle, Berlin knows something is amiss as soon as he transplants Sarkin into an adult relationship, and here begins his ultimate downward spiral. Sarkin heightens her intimidating and demanding attitude when Berlin seems hesitant about moving in with her, and she chastises him for his fear and inaction: “Thinking! Think and think and think! You are afraid to do. Afraid to break away. All your fine dreams and thinking and pretending ... now you can do something, Spec Four” (297). Berlin has written his very “innocent” little girl into a restless lover, who will get what she wishes by threatening his masculinity, his stick-to-itiveness, his courage, and his commitment. The relationship further disintegrates after Berlin gives in to her demands and acquires the apartment. She gives even more attention to the lieutenant, bestowing him with affections she once reserved for her special Spec Four. Berlin creates a Vietnamese woman who does what he fears most: humiliates him. As a result, he feels incompetent in his role as a lover, which prompts him to seek solace in his platoon—to reattach himself back to the sanctity of the collective.

Though Berlin eventually understands that Sarkin is slipping completely beyond his mental grasp, he tries one last time to revive her innocent image by using her as the mouthpiece for the flipside of his mental argument, the argument for peace versus violence, in which Sarkin urges Berlin to “be a man” and have the courage to walk away from the chase for *Cacciato*, to permanently break away from his misguided collective. Unfortunately, Sarkin never truly reaches the status he intends because before the interior debate begins he strips her of her real voice and replaces it with “a man’s voice, precise and unaccented and impersonal” (317). Nevertheless, Sarkin is, at the very least, the face of peace, and she pleads her case accordingly. She vehemently asks Berlin to live the life he has so carefully imagined, to put aside his fear, to join her and to forget *Cacciato*:

Spec Four Paul Berlin, I urge you to act. Having dreamed a marvelous dream, I urge you to step boldly into it, to join your dream and live it. Do not be deceived by false obligation. You are obliged, by all that is just and good, to pursue only the felicity that you yourself have imagined. Do not let fear stop you. Do not be frightened by ridicule or censure or embarrassment, do not fear name-calling, do not fear the scorn of others. (318)

Berlin will not allow himself to be swayed by Sarkin's demonstrative pleas, and in his formal response he unwittingly reveals what has been bothering him all along, and why his imaginative powers have consequently failed to hold on to Sarkin. While Berlin begins his detailed rebuttal claiming that he has made "promises" that he feels "obligated" to uphold, the true reason for his inaction (in all aspects of his life) lies in his paralyzing fear:

I am afraid of running away. I am afraid of exile. I fear what might be thought of me by those I love. I fear the loss of their respect. I fear the loss of my own reputation. Reputation, as read in the eyes of my father and mother, the people of my hometown, my friends. I fear being an outcast. I fear being thought of as a coward. I fear that even more than cowardice itself. (320)

In his article "A Rumor of War: Another Look at the Observation Post in Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato*," Jack Slay declares that O'Brien's novel is a detailed account of Berlin's "moral struggle to live, even survive, in his present moment, to face up to, if not overcome, his repeated cowardice" (82). Slay goes on to note that by refusing Sarkin's pleas to "step boldly into his dream," Berlin also "refuses to succumb to the temptation of desertion," to follow in Cacciato's "fading footsteps" (84-85). Such hard-nosed stubbornness prompts Slay to declare that Berlin's unwillingness to capitulate to Sarkin's appeal is his "bravest moment" (85).

However, any reader of O'Brien's powerful work, *The Things They Carried*, in which he recounts his feelings of fear and anger upon receiving his draft notice, remembers the infamous lines as given by O'Brien the narrator when he fails to jump out of Elroy's boat and swim to the safety of Canada: "I was a coward. I went to the war" (61). For O'Brien, Cacciato is undoubtedly the hero in this tale. And Berlin's speech above finally proves that he fears the label "coward" more than the reality of living as such when he ultimately chooses the easy and acceptable path of "cowardice," to

chase Cacciato despite his inner desires for Cacciato's success and happiness, and despite the fact that he does not believe in the war from which Cacciato flees. Sarkin is the ultimate reminder of this—not only is she the face of peace, but she is the visual representation of his weakness and paralyzing inaction.

After he makes his final decision to become a “soldier” again, Berlin's creation deserts him. Like Phuong's desertion of Fowler, Sarkin sneaks away from her Westerner in the middle of the night (with the ailing lieutenant, who has *rejected* his soldier identity), erases all memory of herself, and leaves the apartment clean and orderly: “The rugs, the clock, the watercolor, [. . .] geranium, and new curtains—all, gone. The floors were swept. The bed was made up in crisp forty-five-degree angles. The closets were bare. In the kitchen a single joss stick smoldered on the counter” (324). Even in her painful exit, Sarkin still fits the mold of a compliant Vietnamese woman—at least as best as Berlin can manage. Nonetheless, he can no longer imagine her as obedient and faithful; she has now initiated another (presumably) sexual relationship with a much older man and thus confirmed her status as a deceitful “whore.”

After Sarkin's hurtful departure, Berlin's total fantasy comes to a screeching and painful end. In his attempt to imagine a harmless and loving Vietnamese girl, Berlin creates a promiscuous woman who leaves him feeling weak and betrayed. Wishing to maintain the four walls of his fictitious reality, Berlin tries to keep his mind on his task, to go after Cacciato, but his imaginative powers are tapped, and his confidence is obliterated. Once he enters the room in which Cacciato is allegedly hidden, he feels uncontrollable fear, and hears whining and crying: “Someone was whimpering. A pitiful, silly sound” (330). Sadly, Berlin is slow to the realization that he is the one fretfully sobbing and shaking. He snaps back into reality only to learn that he urinated himself while he and his troop were chasing Cacciato, not in Paris, but on a hillside in Vietnam, and is exceedingly embarrassed by his cowardice. Berlin can no longer tell himself that he is someone's protector, that he is needed, that he is important. He was completely dependent upon Sarkin, his supposedly weak and fragile little girl, to uphold his very sense of self. Unfortunately, she simply heightened feelings of fear and uncertainty that were already present.

Without having his GI to ever inflict violence upon an Asian woman, much less be on the receiving end of it, O'Brien has still managed to portray her as threatening and the GI as a victim to her vast arsenal of weapons. Sarkin is not a VC who has taken out two platoon members, as was the unnamed fourteen-year-old in Heinemann's novel. Yet, she is just as dangerous and just as damaging. In *Cacciato* O'Brien proves that a combat soldier in Vietnam could not view real Vietnamese women as America did before the war, as Pyle viewed Phuong. More importantly, though, he shows that

even in one's imagination, the soldier cannot reclaim Phuong because Phuong never really existed either. As representatives of *real* Vietnamese women, Sarkin and Phuong are not virginal flowers or young Geishas in training, but Asian women who have been brought up in the realities of war—they have problems and desires of their own, and cannot be expected to maintain/repair the fragile/shattered confidence of two young and disillusioned Americans. However, Berlin remains the most sympathetic of characters, fighting an immoral war while wildly grasping to the image of the man he was before he was thrown into it, an image that is getting more difficult to discern with the passing of each terrifying day. Although sympathy for Berlin has been achieved, O'Brien could not completely expunge the dangerous "whore" out of the Asian woman; for the combat soldier, the "gook" inevitably veers her threatening head, every—single—time.

Works Cited

Bates, Milton J. "Men, Women, and Vietnam." *America Rediscovered: Critical Essays on Literature and Film of the Vietnam War*. Ed. Owen W. Gilman, Jr. and Lorrie Smith. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc. 1990. 27-63.

Greene, Graham. *The Quiet American*. New York: Penguin Books, 1955

Heinemann, Larry. *Paco's Story*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1979

Jason, Phillip K. "Sexism and Racism in Vietnam War Fiction." *Mosaic* 23.3 (1990): 125-137.

Kerr, Douglas. "The Quiet American and the novel." *Studies in the Novel* 38.1 (2006): 95+. *Academic OneFile*. Web. 9 Feb. 2016.

Kinney, Katherine. *Friendly Fire: American Images of the Vietnam War*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Lawson, Jacqueline E. "'She's a Pretty Woman . . . for a Gook': The Misogyny of the Vietnam War." *Fourteen Landing Zones: Approaches to Vietnam War Literature*. Ed. Philip K. Jason. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1991. 15-37.

O'Brien, Tim. (1978), *Going After Cacciato*. New York: Broadway Books.

---. (1990), *The Things They Carried*. New York: Broadway Books.

Palm, Edward F. "The Quiet American revisited: Orientalism reconsidered." *War, Literature & The Arts* 23.1 (2011). *Academic OneFile*. Web. 9 Feb. 2016.

Pearce, Joseph. "The unquiet Graham Greene: President Bush's invocation of Alden Pyle reveals his dangerous naivete." *The American Conservative* 6.20 (2007): 25+. *Academic OneFile*. Web. 9 Feb. 2016.

Slay, Jack. "A Rumor of War: Another Look at the Observation Post in Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 41.1 (1999): 79. Academic OneFile. Web. 9 Feb. 2016.

Smith, Zadie. 2004. "Shades of Greene." *The Guardian* (17 September), 13 February, 2016. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2004/sep/18/classics.grahamgreene>.

"The Analogy of Iraq & Vietnam: Address to the Veterans of Foreign Wars National Convention." (2007). *PresidentialRhetoric.com*. 13 February, 2016. <http://www.presidentialrhetoric.com/speeches/08.22.07.html>

Womack, Anne-Marie. "'Just a Creature of His Own Making': Metafiction, Identification, and Gender in *Going After Cacciato*." *Modern Fiction Studies*. 59.4 (2013): 811-832. Academic OneFile. Web. 9 Feb. 2016.

LISA FERGUSON is an adjunct English professor at Southern New Hampshire University (COCE) where she teaches graduate literature courses and a Contributing Faculty member at Walden University's Center for Academic Excellence where she teaches graduate writing. She received her Ph.D. at the University of Alabama and taught for several years at Polk State College before moving back to her home state of Kentucky. She writes about the treatment of gender in war fiction, and her articles have appeared in the *Journal of Research in Gender Studies*. She is the daughter of a Vietnam War veteran and the wife of an Iraq War veteran.