

to men. What, then, remains of war, an archetypically masculine endeavor, in this Memorial? If critics of the Memorial's initial design were occupied by this question, they did not ask it directly. The unconscious strategy was to deflect and displace. Rather than make an issue of the threat to masculinity by feminine forms, the problem was linked to the Memorial's blackness, its placement within rather than upon the earth, its suggestion of weakness and shame rather than pride and strength.<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, Maya Lin's critics made a list of demands that would draw out the Memorial from the inferior realm of darkness and earth into the superior realm of light and sky. They wanted the black granite changed to white; they wanted the walls moved above ground; they wanted a flag. National honor would thus be restored. The masculine (or "phallic," as Maya Lin would put it) would also be asserted and, in the flag, find its patriotic representation.

In addition, a decision was made to "erect" a statue that would serve as a counterpoint to the "establishment" of the wall. Here, Congress had turned away from its own unconscious assertion of masculinity by revising the wording of the Congressional Joint Resolution authorizing the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund. The resolution was passed with the original phrase "erect a memorial" changed to read "establish a memorial" (U.S. Senate 1980, p. 9433). However, once the new decision to erect a statue was made, and the sculptor Frederick Hart chosen to implement it, the masculine purview in matters of representing the veterans was overtly acknowledged. The sculptor himself certainly saw it this way. Drawing an explicit comparison between himself and Maya Lin, Hart claimed a special understanding of the veterans: he had studied them for three years. In this connection, he put one of our society's masculine traditions to the service of his craft: "I became close friends with many vets, drank with them in bars." While this experience converts directly into artistic privilege, "Lin's piece is a serene exercise in contemporary art done in a vacuum with no knowledge of the subject" (Hess 1983, p. 124). But how could a young, university-sheltered woman, or any woman, know this subject? In *Time's* assessment of the statue, we are told that the three soldiers "suggest the wordless fellowship that is forged only in combat." In our society, as Wheeler claimed, only men can comprehend that wordless "fellowship."

Even if we grant this claim, the anxious response of the Memorial's critics had, as noted above, another source: the fact of defeat. Since few things threaten traditional concepts of manhood more than defeat in

<sup>12</sup> These features of the Memorial might be viewed by at least one symbolic anthropologist as implying its autochthonous (feminine) as opposed to cultural (masculine) origins (Ortner 1974; see also Jeffords 1988).

battle, the symbolic burden must be very great indeed on any memorial that seeks to elevate the losing protagonists. As one military officer put it, “Why build a memorial to losers?” (*National Geographic*, May 1985, p. 558). If both the losers and the loss were ignored and the emphasis placed on the transcendent values of the cause, then perhaps no one’s masculinity would be threatened. But since the military defeat could not be ignored, the flag and statue can be read as palliatives to doubts about the toughness of America’s fighting men. Perhaps this is why the statue was so important to Maya Lin’s critics: it drew attention away from the individual men who fought and lost in Vietnam and shifted that attention onto generic, that is, timeless, heroic soldiers. A neat idea, but it was not a convincing one. Its originators did not even convince themselves.

Let us take a closer look at the statue of the three soldiers. It is of a greenish-golden hue. The soldiers, seemingly disoriented, and garbed in finely wrought but distressed uniforms, gaze at the wall. Weapons hang uselessly from two of the soldiers’ lowered arms and rest across the other soldier’s back. Here, then, is the realism that critics of the wall’s abstraction desired. Here is life—as opposed to the wall’s expression of death—but it is life exhausted and confused. These men are of the war, but not at the moment in it. And since the soldiers are placed on only a modest pedestal, visitors cannot even figuratively look up to them; instead, they confront the soldiers almost at eye level. The mien of this statue is not heroic.

Considering the memorial complex as a whole, we find an even broader pattern of assertion and qualification. The wall embodied a controversial assertion: that individuals should be remembered and their cause ignored; the qualifications came with the flag and statue. These, in turn, were beset by their own internal tensions. The statue was conceived as a reactive assertion of pride, heroism, and masculinity, but, through the particular form it took, it emerged as a tempering of all these things. The flag seems to be unconditionally assertive because it is the only part of the memorial site that draws our eyes upward, but we notice in the peculiar dedication inscribed on its base a kind of backing off: “This flag affirms the principles of freedom for which [the Vietnam veterans] fought and their pride in having served under difficult circumstances.” The euphemism is transparent enough. By “difficult circumstances” we are to understand not the power of our enemy but the feebleness of our cause. In this light, the similarities among the three parts of the Memorial become more salient than their differences, despite the realism of the statue’s figures and the vertical prominence of the flag. Whether we look down, across, or up, we find ambivalence about the meaning of this war and its protagonists refracted throughout.

While the addition of the flag and statue made the Vietnam Memorial

look more like a traditional war monument, it also amplified the tensions and ambivalence that induced the original departure from a traditional war monument design. The vehicle for that departure, the wall of names, admits of its own internal qualifications, but these are more subtle than the ones built into the Memorial's two other parts and are perhaps more important as clues to its sociological significance.

#### THE POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF NAMES

After reflecting on the criteria for the memorial competition, Maya Lin expressed her personal agreement with what they were meant to accomplish. "Many earlier memorials," she said, "were propagandized statements about the victory, the issues, the politics, and not about the people who served and died. I felt a memorial should be honest about the reality of war and be for the people who gave their lives" (*National Geographic*, May 1985, p. 557). Such a memorial, Lin also agreed, must contain the name of every soldier who died.

The partial list of war dead is a familiar memorial device, typically found on plaques in schools, churches, city halls, and town squares to mark local sacrifices made on behalf of national causes. Such a list is also found on larger memorial complexes, like the wall of the missing at the national cemeteries in Honolulu and Manila. Lin's conception is different. She presents a national list, a complete inventory of war dead, but she does not make it part of a recognizable monument. She presents nothing but a list, without even a label to identify its contents. She thus defines the war memorial genre as broadly as it has ever been defined before.

To list the names of every fallen soldier, with no symbolic reference to the cause or country for which they died, immediately highlights the individual. But, once it has been determined that the individual will overshadow cause and country, the task of constructing that individual becomes the primary concern. Precisely what, and how much, is to be said? Since Maya Lin's response to the question is to take the naming criterion and make it her dominant motif, there is no identifying of rank, nor any other individualizing markers, such as membership in a specific military service (army, navy, etc.) or place of civilian residence. With the individual's uniqueness thus dissolved into a homogenizing sequence of death dates, how can one claim that the names on the wall personify anything that American society values?

The Memorial's failure to dignify the names of the war dead was lamented by many. The *National Review*, for example, compared the names engraved on the unembellished Memorial wall to a list of traffic accidents (September 18, 1981, p. 1064). The magazine *USA Today*

(March 1983, p. 70) observed that “nowhere on the memorial was there to be any reference to where or why these people died, and no flag or patriotic symbol of any kind would indicate that honor or dedication to duty were involved in their deaths.”<sup>13</sup> More frequently, however, the Memorial’s naming scheme was regarded as a singularly American tribute to such values as pluralism, egalitarianism, and respect for the individual. In other words, the very fact that Americans can honor a name, regardless of rank and, one might hazard to say, regardless of mission, reveals the respect that American society gives to the individual.

But here, too, an alternative meaning can be discerned. A *Newsweek* article (reprinted in *Reader’s Digest*) illustrated this meaning in its coverage of the National Cathedral candlelight vigil. The article begins with an attempt to find colorful distinctions in an otherwise undifferentiated and tedious inventory of names. However, the particularizing makes use of only one vehicle—ethnic diversity:

Names. Jose K. Brown, Sai G. Gew, Glenn F. Cashdollar, Kenyu Shimbukuru, Famous L. Lane, Witold J. Leszczyński, Thomas L. LittleSun, Salvatore J. Piscitello, Max Lieberman, Savas Escamilla Trevino, Billy Joe Lawrence. For 56 hours they read the names in the gothic confines of the National Cathedral. Rhythmic Spanish names. Tongue-twisting Polish names, guttural German, exotic African, homely Anglo-Saxon names. Chinese, Polynesian, Indian, and Russian names. They are names which reach deep into the heart of America, each testimony to a family’s decision, sometime in the past, to wrench itself from home and culture to test our country’s promise of new opportunities and a better life. [*Newsweek*, November 22, 1982, p. 82]

This passage depicts America as a melting pot, but it is a melting pot whose contents show some of the stereotyped features commonly ascribed to different nationalities. The southern Europeans have rhythm, Africans are exotic. Such stereotyping further undermines the celebration of diversity by implicitly reasserting the salience of class. The names sampled by *Newsweek*’s author represent most of this country’s economically and politically disadvantaged groups. Even the Anglo-Saxon names are designated “homely,” and remind us more of Appalachia than of Main Street.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the article’s celebration of America’s ethnic pluralism is muted at a deeper level through caricatured references to the working-

<sup>13</sup> More recently, Terrance Fox saw this anonymity as a triumph of the “new collectivism” (1989, pp. 211–20).

<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., Bobbie Ann Mason’s novel, *In Country*: “It was country boys. When you get to that memorial, you look at the names. You’ll see all those country boy names, I bet you anything. Bobby Gene and Freddie Ray and Jimmy Bob Calhoun. I knew a boy named Jimmy Bob Calhoun that got killed over there. You look at those names and tell me if they’re not mostly country boy names. Boys who didn’t know their ass from their elbow” (1985, pp. 235–36).

class men who fought the war. The familiar class relations of wealth and poverty, power and powerlessness, are thereby reaffirmed—not only in *Newsweek* and *Reader's Digest* but also on the wall of the Memorial itself.

Note, too, how the designer of that wall, Maya Ying Lin, is named in the media. If, as the stereotype goes, all Asians look alike, how much more must their names sound alike. Thus five prestigious publications misspell Lin's name in four different ways: Maya Yin Lin (*Time*, November 9, 1981); Maya Ling Lin (*Washington Post*, November 12, 1984); Maya Yang Lin (*National Review*, December 11, 1981, and *New Republic*, December 1982); Maya Ling Yin (*U.S. News and World Report*, November 22, 1982). Carelessness in the public rendering of Lin's name undermines still further the respect for diversity that the monument is supposed to affirm.<sup>15</sup>

Whatever the media's attitude toward the Memorial's designer, their references to the American soldier's ethnicity, along with doubts expressed elsewhere about his powers as a fighter and about the cause for which he fought, all contribute to the undermining of widespread desires for a heroic monument to the Vietnam War. However, these negative themes hardly exhaust what was said about the Memorial and its men, much less what was felt about them. These residual statements and, most notably, these feelings transformed the Memorial wall into a more glorious war monument than the critics could have imagined—a monument that made even the most traditional versions of this commemorative genre, with their unqualified affirmation of heroism and patriotism, seem inadequate.

#### USES OF GENRE: THE ENSHRINEMENT PROCESS

The meaning of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is defined by the way people behave in reference to it. Some monuments are rarely talked about or visited and never put to ceremonial use. Other monuments, like the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, are used often as formal ceremonial sites and visited year after year by large numbers of people. Between the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and its visitors, a very different relationship obtains. Not only is the Memorial an object of frequent ceremony and frequent visitation (more than 2.5 million visitors and 1,100–1,500 reunions per year),<sup>16</sup> it is also an object with which visitors enter into active

<sup>15</sup> The embarrassment is compounded by the Pentagon official who referred to Maya Lin's Chinese descent in his criticism of her memorial (Hess 1983, p. 121).

<sup>16</sup> Personal communication from Duery Felton, Jr., curator, Vietnam Veterans Memorial Collection Museum and Archeological Regional Storage Facility, National Park Service.

and affective relationships. These relationships have thwarted all original intentions as to what the Memorial should be and represent.

Conceived as something to be passively looked at and contemplated, the Vietnam Memorial has become an object of emotion. This is not the case for the Memorial site as a whole, just the wall and its names. The names on the wall are touched, their letters traced by the moving finger. The names are caressed. The names are reproduced on paper by pencil rubbing and taken home. And something is left from home itself—a material object bearing special significance to the deceased or a written statement by the visitor or mourner.

The dedications of the aggrieved are a spectacle that to many is more moving than the Memorial wall itself. More goes into spectators' reactions, however, than morbid curiosity, for the scenes of mourning are not altogether private affairs. These scenes make palpable a collective loss known to all. Not only, therefore, do friends and family bring their personal grief to the Memorial wall, but society exercises a moral pressure over those not directly affected by loss to add their presence to the situation and to align their sentiments with it.

This moral pressure produces the large gatherings from which much of the Memorial's dramatic impact derives. By contrast, when the Memorial's grounds are deserted, its wall appears less magnetic, less moving, less memorable. Durkheim was referring to such a contrast when he declared that the experience of being in a sacred shrine "is only the sentiment inspired by the *group* in its members, but projected out of the consciousnesses that experience them, and objectified. To be objectified they are fixed upon some object which thus becomes sacred. . . . Therefore the sacred character assumed by an object is not implied in the intrinsic properties of this latter: it is added to them" (1965, p. 261). Just so, the Veterans Memorial is properly designated a sacred shrine because it is the object of solemn assemblies in which moral sentiments arise and reinforce one another.

Since assembly and arousal cannot in themselves account for the Memorial's sacred character, we must not follow Durkheim too closely. Durkheim believed that the sacredness of an object like the Memorial wall obtains exclusively from the way people react to it. Yet, the wall is more than just a convenient screen on which the Memorial's visitors project their sentiments. The wall itself is an evoker of these sentiments. If this were not the case, if any object would do to embody collective feeling, as Durkheim believed, then we would be hard pressed to understand why other parts of the Memorial—the flag and the statue—do not evoke the same reactions as does the wall. Material tokens are placed much less frequently at the flag and statue than at the wall; expressions of strong emotion occur almost exclusively at the wall; the demeanor of

visitors is more solemn, by far, in the vicinity of the wall; the traveling or portable shrine consists of the wall alone. It is the design of the wall—specifically, its list of names—that induces these reactions. The names are the objects of a ritual relation that no other part of the Memorial site can sustain. Withal, the ideals and memory of the cause, lacking comparable symbolic and social supports, fade into the background.

However, there is another side to this relationship, one that highlights a different aspect of the tension between national causes and their participants. To the original dilemma of how to honor the participant without reference to the cause, there is a corresponding reciprocal problem of how to ignore the cause without denying the participant. That problem did not occur to the art commissioners who wanted to protect the wall's artistic (ideological?) serenity from "corny patriotic claptrap" (U.S. House of Representatives 1982, p. E5108). But what kind of protection could they give? The corniness arose not from the addition of a flag and statue but from the way visitors conducted themselves in the vicinity of the wall. The impulses and sentiments motivating this conduct, however, were varied and complicated.

#### USES OF GENRE: THE REPRESENTATION OF AMBIVALENCE

All nonperishable articles left at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial are collected each day and kept at the Museum and Archeological Regional Storage Facility. Row after row of airtight shelters preserve these "gifts" for the future, thus extending the Memorial in space and in time. This part of the Veterans Memorial complex is the most populist, for its contents, in accordance with Interior Department policy, are determined by the people who visit the Memorial and not by professional curators. It is difficult to tell whether or not the idea for such a museum was part of the Interior Department's struggle against the elitism of the Commission of Fine Arts. That the museum collection negates the complaints of the Memorial's early detractors as well as the praise of its early defenders is more certain. An assessment of the objects themselves shows this to be so.

The most colorful objects left by visitors are flowers, taped to the wall or placed on the ground beneath a loved one's name. Nothing of a political nature is embodied in these floral displays; however, the Park Service's inventory of other (nonperishable) items does convey a coherent political message. This inventory shows that the one object most frequently left by the wall is a small American flag attached to a stick and set in the ground below the name that the visitor desired to mark. Through this offering, visitors uttered a political statement that was not supposed to be made. They asserted their patriotism, their loyalty to a

nation. Whether they got the idea themselves or copied it from one another, they could think of no better way to dignify their loved one's memory than to associate his name with his country's emblem.

These assertions are amplified by other objects. The largest category of objects, almost a third of everything that has been deposited by the visitors, consists of military items, mostly patches and insignias marking military-unit membership, as well as parts of uniforms, dog tags, identification bracelets, medals, awards, and certificates. The memorial site was thus decorated by symbols of the roles through which living veterans once enacted their commitment to the nation. These symbols began to appear in great profusion as soon as the Memorial was dedicated and continued to appear two years later when the statue of the three soldiers was unveiled. Designed to draw attention to the individual and away from the nation and its cause, the Memorial's wall turns out to be a most dramatic locus of patriotic feeling. The wall's use moved it toward that traditional war monument genre that opponents and supporters alike once believed it deviated from.

When profusely decorated with patriotic emblems, the wall alone may enhance our idea of the traditional war monument, but it cannot embody that idea. This is because patriotism is not the only response that the wall excites. The Memorial wall has in fact become a kind of debating forum—a repository of diverse opinions about the very war that occasioned its construction. Traditional war monuments serve no such reflexive function.

From its very inception, the Memorial's sponsors insisted that it would make no statement about the war—a promise predicated on the assumption that political silence could somehow be ensured by the Memorial's design. An ordinance that expressly prohibits political demonstrations on Memorial grounds supplemented this assumption. Thus deprived of a traditional public forum, political opinions were, instead, inserted into many of the written statements brought to the wall. Letters, poems, and memos, often accompanied by photographs, can be viewed analytically as publicly accessible private sentiments or as privatized public opinion. Either way, they articulate the public's diverse visions of Vietnam. Not all these written statements included opinions about the war itself. Among the opinions that were expressed in the letters, however, more than half were ambivalent or negative. And the wall is the site where these opinions were displayed. One poem declares: "And in that time / When men decide and feel safe / To call the war insane / Take one moment to embrace / Those gentle heroes / You left behind." Another correspondent laments the soldiers who went "So far from home and the land of their own / To fight in a war the reason unknown." A more subtle critique is seen in a letter written by an American soldier fighting

in Vietnam in 1968: "Anyway, all the news is bad this time. I have 71 days to go now and if I make it I hope I never have to come back here again." Written on the letter is the location on the wall of that soldier's name. Finally, an obviously alienated correspondent exclaims: "Still don't know why? Think you guys may be better off."<sup>17</sup>

Some visitors to the Memorial admitted their inability to understand why Americans died in Vietnam, but they considered their ignorance a personal problem, not a sign that the war and its deaths lacked purpose: "God has His reason; / God has His plan— / The reasons are not available / To the Ordinary Man." Others were more successful in their search for the war's purpose and made their discovery explicit in letters. A 13-year-old girl declared: "I feel like I owe you men something because if it were not for you, I might not be living in a free country."

These letters and poems, no less than the other items brought to the wall, reveal that many people are unable to look back on the war in a politically neutral way.<sup>18</sup> Notwithstanding the claims of its official sponsors, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial elicits the same tensions as those that divided the nation during the war itself. As time passes, this capacity to evoke affirmative and critical sentiments endures. The volume of objects deposited at the Memorial is as great or greater today as when the Memorial was dedicated, and the range, if not the exact proportion of the different objects, is the same. Flags, although no longer stored and inventoried, continue to appear in profusion. Military objects are still deposited by Vietnam veterans, and these are supplemented by military objects deposited by post-Vietnam soldiers. Personal items and letters, too, appear as frequently as ever. And many of the recent letters bear criticism of American policy in different parts of the world, particularly Central America, comparing it to the policy that led to war in Vietnam.<sup>19</sup>

In the Veterans Memorial, then, we see none of the hegemonic influence that forms the basis for Gusfield and Michalowicz's "manipulative theories" of secular symbolism (1984, pp. 424–27). If the Memorial were

<sup>17</sup>This last sentiment reflects the sense of liminality felt by many veterans: they were home from Vietnam, but not "at home." Living an apparently endless, internal Vietnam War, those veterans had strong responses to the Memorial's welcoming message. Maya Lin had stated that she wanted the wall, with its seemingly interminable list of names, to read "like an epic Greek poem" (*National Geographic* 1985, p. 511). Although it was probably the list-drenched war poem, the *Iliad*, that she had in mind, the veterans were transforming the *Iliad* into the *Odyssey*—the story of a man struggling to come home. Throughout the many Veterans Day activities accompanying the Memorial's dedication, the expression "welcome home" was repeated. In fact, "Homecoming" was the official theme of the day.

<sup>18</sup> For analysis of these letters, see Palmer (1987) and Carlson and Hocking (1988).

<sup>19</sup> Personal communication, Duery Felton, Jr.

in fact a tool of state power, if it were adopted by the state in order to maintain allegiance to an elite and to promote authoritative ways of seeing society (as Haines [1986] suggests), then that tool has not been used very effectively.

#### CONTEXTS, CONSTITUENCIES, AND MEANING

Effective commemorative tools check ambivalence. The ambivalence attending the Vietnam War, as we have seen, is not suppressed but summarized by the several parts of the Vietnam Memorial's physical makeup. This ambivalence is not necessarily something the individual feels. It is a social fact, an outcome of the incompatible commemorative viewpoints that were held and the measures that were taken by different constituencies. The Memorial is thus a ritual symbol that expresses the contradictions of society.

The Memorial's contradictions not only betray the state's inability to effect a uniform interpretation of the past; they also affirm the nation as a reality whose salience transcends the state. These affirmations are most apparent to those who regard the Memorial naively, who possess no knowledge of the issues that attended its creation.<sup>20</sup> Our reading of the letters suggests that the people who came to see the names of their loved ones and comrades on the Memorial's wall pay no attention to its color or placement or to its vertical or horizontal lines. Approaching it from the front, they only see the Lincoln Memorial looming before them, and behind, the Washington Monument. Although Maya Lin deliberately aligned these shrines to the Memorial's wall, she and her admirers hardly mentioned, let alone discussed, them in their efforts to defend her original design. For this reason, and because walls that point nowhere make for aesthetic awkwardness, our impression that this alignment was effected for artistic rather than ideological purposes may be justified. However, it is also our impression that for two years following the Memorial's dedication, the Lincoln and Washington monuments (enveloped by the national atmosphere of the Mall [Griswold 1986]) were functional surrogates for the statue and flag, and in later years were supplements to them, eliciting a moral awareness that a memorial wall alone might have been incapable of inspiring. It is, in fact, the capacity to evoke the surpassing presence of the nation itself (a capacity that the Commission of Fine Arts wanted to see the Vietnam Memorial deprived of) that defines the ultimate, nonnegotiable aspect of the war monument genre. Divested of this national presence, as it would be if placed permanently outside

<sup>20</sup> See Ehrenhaus (1989, p. 96) on the distinction between "authentic" and "unauthentic" responses to the Veterans Memorial.

its existing monumental surroundings, the Memorial wall would be experienced differently. It would remain a solemn and affecting monument (as is the wall's portable replica), but against a background of high rises or rolling meadows, against symbols of locality rather than the transcendent reality of the nation, it would become less stirring and magnetic, less sacred. Of this reality the Vietnam Memorial's flag and statue are merely external supports. In a more mundane setting, however, these would be more critical additions to the Memorial than they are in the nation's capital.

The intensive, emotional reaction to the Memorial has superimposed itself upon, but has never replaced other reactions. The Memorial as it is presently constituted by wall, flag, and statue remains a multifocal version of the war monument genre, a version ambiguous enough to accommodate a wide span of commemorative meanings. By interacting with it and interpreting it, different constituencies make this multivocal quality operative. For politicians, the Memorial helps to acquit the nation's overdue debt to its veterans; for artists, it represents a novel combination of symbols and forms; for the veterans, it is an emblem of their rightful place in the nation's political and moral heritage; for families of the dead, it is a shrine linking home and nation; for those who supported the war and defined it as honorable, it is a vindication; for those who opposed the war and defined it as dishonorable, also a vindication; and, for some tourists, the Memorial is merely a place to go.

Attended by all but interpreted in different ways, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial occasions solidarity in the absence of common beliefs. It induces people who think differently to display the same ritual respect toward the soldiers. While some scholars, notably Émile Durkheim (and followers, including David Kertzer [1988]), construe common action rather than common beliefs as the essence of solidarity, there remains a distinction to be drawn between monuments that induce uniform ritual respect without consensus in belief (like the Vietnam Memorial), and monuments that sustain both common belief and uniform ritual respect (like the Revolutionary War and the world war memorials). At stake in this distinction are two different conceptions of the past, two different ways of affectively responding to it, and two different ways of representing it. To consensual monuments goes the task of celebrating the past; to dissensual monuments goes the task of coming to terms with it, of integrating into the collective memory political divisions and military defeat.

Because it takes longer to come to terms with an unsuccessful effort than to rejoice over a successful one, the Veterans Memorial design remains partly open-ended. The most immediate possibility for further change in that design is the addition of a statue to honor women Vietnam

veterans—the nurses.<sup>21</sup> Explaining the motive for its effort, a spokeswoman for the Vietnam Woman's Memorial Project stated: "If you go to the Wall, and see the three fighting men, do you think of the women?" (*Atlanta Constitution*, May 3, 1986, p. A2). This spokeswoman is challenging the claim that the existing monument adequately represents all the Vietnam War's participants. However, difficult obstacles must be overcome before this challenge succeeds.

The first obstacle is the problem of reaching consensus on what a suitable women's memorial should look like. Consensus is so problematic that the jury for the recent (1990) design competition selected two winners—an abstract sculptural form with a water-misting device and a realistic statue of a nurse. The artists, in accordance with jury instructions, are presently working together on a compromise monument.<sup>22</sup> The most formidable obstacle, however, is the series of federal agencies that must approve this compromise. Their members will almost certainly disagree on what women accomplished in Vietnam. As Karal Ann Marling and John Wetenhall (1989) have observed, the ability to think specifically about the significance of women's role in the war has been hindered by the Defense Department, which "pronounced itself unable to arrive at a reasonable estimate of how many women actually went to Vietnam" (p. 348), by disagreements within society about the proper relations of women to war and war commemoration, and by the Commission of Fine Arts, which believes the Memorial's representativeness is broad enough and that any addition to the Veterans Memorial will only encourage more submissions and demands for its further modification.<sup>23</sup>

This resistance to the placement on the Memorial's site of a separate marker for women—especially the resistance of the Commission of Fine Arts—must be understood in the context of the emergence of new constituencies actively seeking individual recognition—a reflection perhaps of the peculiarities of our "postmodern" political life, wherein fragmentation of interest groups and recognition of cultural pluralism transform our notions of political enfranchisement and expression.<sup>24</sup> But the new

<sup>21</sup> One of the most recent Vietnam memorials to honor female veterans as well as male veterans was unveiled in Atlanta on Veterans Day, 1988 (*Atlanta Journal* [November 12, 1988], p. 1C). For a useful discussion of the problematic role of women in war memorials, see Inglis (1987).

<sup>22</sup> Communication from the Vietnam Women's Memorial Project.

<sup>23</sup> The discouraged admirers of Vietnam's sentry dogs, e.g., are looking elsewhere for their memorial site, but their first preference was a place near the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (*Chicago Tribune* [August 2, 1988], p. C5).

<sup>24</sup> This postmodern concept of politics is reproduced in the postmodern quality of the Memorial's present design. The realism of its statue stands as a pastiche-like supplement to the abstractness of its wall. Tradition is thus appended to avant garde.

constituencies may also participate in the unfinished nature of the Vietnam War itself, raising the question, Are defeats always “unfinished”? Victories, after all, are to be celebrated; defeats are to be explained, and every explanation, being inherently contestable, is an invitation to continuing debate. This sense of the war’s incompleteness is reproduced, but not resolved, in the incompleteness of the Memorial. Each addition to the Memorial can be read as an attempt at bringing us closer to reconciling ourselves to the war and its participants. However, the reconciliation process diverges along two different paths. One path—the addition of flag and statue—aims at legitimating the cause (perhaps belying our desire to rewrite the story of Vietnam by turning defeat into victory.)<sup>25</sup> The other path concerns the participants, with each addition (starting with the women veterans) opening the door to new constituencies demanding special recognition. In both cases, complete reconciliation remains elusive. But if we are right about the Memorial’s articulating rather than concealing the nation’s ambivalence toward the war, then the Memorial’s open-endedness may actually be one of the features that contributes to its salience.

#### DISCUSSION

This study of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial highlights the broad range of variation presently possible within the war monument genre. Unlike the kinds of monuments that mark popular wars, the Vietnam Memorial underwent frequent changes that both affirmed and modified the traditional conception of the war monument. Starting as a modest plaque, it became a politically sanitized wall sculpture, then a more differentiated memorial that included a flag and a realistic statue. These changes resulted from a political process involving competing claims on how the Vietnam War should be remembered. The process was itself a reflection of contradictory assessments of the war in American society as a whole.

During the 1970s and early 1980s, Walter Dean Burnham (1982) observed a fundamental shift in America’s values and self-conception—a “reactionary revitalization movement,” as he called it. However, if this new political climate was conservative, it did not reverse the collective verdict on the Vietnam War. In the fall of 1980, for example, 81% and 86% of veterans and adult nonveterans, respectively, believed that America’s soldiers had become “part of a war that went bad.” Of all adults sampled nationwide in March 1982, 50% believed that the United States never tried to win this war. Three years later, only one-third of a compa-

<sup>25</sup> For discussion of the Vietnam War’s reconstitution in film and politics, see Gibson (1989) and McKeever (1989).

rable sample believed that the United States should have tried to win, while more than half, 54%, believed it should not have even sent troops. The American public was very uncertain about the war's purpose. Fifty-seven percent failed to see a clear purpose, and a plurality (45%) of the respondents believed that most of the South Vietnamese people did not care which side won the war. By a two-to-one margin, Americans in the mid-1980s believed that the United States should have left Vietnam earlier than it did (Harris 1980; *Washington Post* 1982, 1985a, 1985b; *Los Angeles Times* 1985. For detail, see MacPherson [1984]).

That the attitudes expressed in the mid-1980s are essentially similar to those prevailing during the early 1980s, when plans to commemorate the Vietnam veterans were realized, is a safe assumption. The impetus for building a monument to these men and the warmth with which that monument was received by the people could not have resulted from a new, positive consensus on the war. This case thus suggests an alternative to Durkheim's focus on moral unity as the ultimate object of commemoration. Durkheim believed that people engage in commemoration in order to remain faithful to the past, but he was not thinking about any part of the past, only that which is appealing and heroic. When people remember in this way, he said (1965, p. 420), their belief in the goodness of their society becomes stronger: "The glorious souvenirs which are made to live again before their eyes, and with which they feel that they have a kinship, give them a feeling of strength and confidence: a man is surer of his faith when he sees to how distant a past it goes back and what great things it has inspired." When a nation or community is in full agreement about the virtue of some previous cause or collective achievement, then heroic monuments do become plausible as objects of ritual and dedication. But when the value of a cause and its achievements is less certain, when its "souvenirs" are less than "glorious," then a different commemoration is conceived, one that induces more sober reflection than enthusiastic uplift, more recognition of losses than celebration of gains.<sup>26</sup>

Our analysis of this process has turned on the way genre enters into the act of commemoration. Although Griswold (1987a, p. 18) is undoubtedly right in her belief that genres admit of no "Aristotelian fixity," we have identified constraints on how far a genre can change before it is no longer itself, as well as how far it must change in order to commemorate its object credibly. A relatively fixed idea about what war monuments should look like and a realization that the Vietnam War was, at best, a

<sup>26</sup> For two studies that regard collective memory from a standpoint situated "beyond the pleasure principle," see Schwartz, Zerubavel, and Barnett (1986) and Schudson (1989, pp. 109–11). See also Schwartz (1982, pp. 392–94).

controversial one—these two conceptions pushed the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in two opposite directions. The traditional conception of war memorials, unopposed by any other consideration, would have led to the creation of a device that celebrated martial heroism in the service of a national cause. From this heroic ideal, no specific design can be inferred; however, those who opposed the first version of the Vietnam Memorial had a clear sense of what they wanted. They designated a cluster of features that all proper war memorials must, in some degree, display: a statement engraved on the monument describing the cause for which it was built, realism of human representation, vertical preeminence, lightness of color, grandness of size, and conspicuous national and military symbolism. No monument needs to incorporate all these features, or even a set combination of them, to qualify as a war memorial; however, at least some items from this cluster seem to be required, and some were indeed used to embellish Maya Lin's minimalist design. The addition of a marker identifying the Memorial wall as a monument to the Vietnam War dead and the addition of a national flag and a realistic statue pulled the initial design in the direction of the traditional war memorial genre.

However, none of these additions was unproblematically heroic; none represented an unproblematic cause. Each addition, as we have documented, contained its own internal qualifications, and these qualifications betray the appeal of the minimal memorial. Deliberately avoiding literal description and realistic representation, cast along modest, horizontal lines free of patriotic symbolism, the minimal war memorial expressly avoids the portrayal of war as a sacred undertaking. Thus, if the image of the traditional war memorial set into motion powerful forces to modify the original Vietnam Memorial design, the reality of the Vietnam War—an undeclared defeat about which the nation was divided—set into motion equally powerful forces to assure that this modification would not go too far.

These two imperatives, one contributing to the development of a traditional monument, the other, to a nontraditional one, worked themselves out in a social context that amplified their tension and their effects and intensified the genre problem. The favorable reception of the nontraditional monument was secured by a public opinion that had come to regard the war as a mistake. In contrast, the appeal of the traditionalized monument derived from a variety of other changes in the political atmosphere, particularly the great conservative awakening of the early 1980s, the growing appreciation of how much the veterans had sacrificed for their country, and the increasing reliance of all political actors on constituency-based interest group activity, which enabled them to exploit the most negotiable aspects of the commemorative genre problem. At

every point in the Vietnam Memorial's development, then, opportunities for change in commemorative form were accompanied by constraints on change. Out of this dynamic field emerged the Vietnam Memorial itself: heroic, but not exultant; acknowledging a cause, but not proclaiming it.

### Social Reproductions

The most successful cultural objects reproduce themselves. Their images reappear across the social and physical landscape, varying enough to permit local incarnations but always retaining some essential elements of the original. In the case of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, this reproduction process has been swift and vigorous. A replica of the Memorial wall is currently traversing the country and is booked beyond 1992. It is an exact, half-scale copy of the original, made of aluminum panels coated with black enamel. The names are raised, in order that they may be touched and pencil rubbings made. The objects left at this "Moving Wall" are gathered up for storage and display at a Moving Wall Museum planned for Santa Fe, New Mexico. Like the original Vietnam Veterans Memorial, this wall also has its moral entrepreneur, a veteran named John Devitt who conceived his mission while visiting the original. Of that Memorial, Devitt (echoing Jan Scruggs) declared: "It's not a statement about war, it's a statement about sacrifice and service (*New York Times*, August 1989, p. 31). Both men, Scruggs and Devitt, evidently had the same idea: to elevate the participant but ignore his cause.

The vast popularity of both the Moving Wall and the Veterans Memorial in Washington suggests that the original design reflects tensions over the Vietnam War that are general in society rather than peculiar to a given set of artists, art critics, and political action groups. Such a general condition is also evidenced in the readiness with which different state and local authorities have brought the Veterans Memorial into their own efforts to commemorate the Vietnam War. Local monuments, like their Washington prototype, superimpose elements of the traditional war monument genre on a nontraditional, minimalist design. Variant combinations of these two forms appear in many cities, including Junction City, Kansas, whose memorial consists of a wall engraved with a list of names and a portrayal of part of the Frederick Hart statue; in Hartwell, Georgia, where two memorial walls—one bearing the names of the six local men who died; the other a variant of the Hart statue—are separated by a broken letter "V" designed to symbolize "broken dreams, promises, and plans." A similar pattern appears in the Springfield, Illinois, memorial, situated near Lincoln's Tomb and consisting of two intersecting walls forming a cross, engraved with names, military insignia, service anthems, and surmounted by flags and an eternal flame; in the Kansas

City Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fountain, combining a name-covered wall and a system of pools symbolizing different aspects of both the war and the people's reaction to it; in the New York City memorial, which replaces the name list with a display of written correspondence showing directly the support and opposition to the war expressed by soldiers before they died; in the Disabled American Veterans Vietnam National Memorial in Eagle's Nest, New Mexico, with its arrangement of names and photographs. Asserting the same principle—the priority of the participant over the cause—these different monuments stand as collective representations of the Vietnam War's significance.<sup>27</sup>

Yet, the salience of participant and cause, individual and national effort, is variable. In Springfield, emblems of national effort are most evident, in New York, least so. The establishment throughout the United States of minimalist memorial forms differentially qualified by elements of the traditional genre show that there are aspects of commemoration that are not shared, yet are still objects of collective representation.

If the Moving Wall and the local Vietnam monuments are seen as “first cousins” to the original Vietnam Veterans Memorial, then its “second cousin” must be the proposed Korean War Veterans Memorial. The affinity between the Vietnam and Korea shrines can be described in terms of two axes along which American wars vary, namely, their justification (weak vs. strong) and outcome (victory vs. defeat).<sup>28</sup> Many Americans judge the Vietnam War negatively on both counts.<sup>29</sup> The Korean War, judged as neither a victory nor a defeat, neither weak nor strong in

<sup>27</sup> Combining traditional and abstract elements, these memorials constitute a small but representative sample of many similar Vietnam War memorials that have been erected throughout the United States. (Personal communication from the late Margaret Donovan of Washington, D.C. At the time of her death, Ms. Donovan was undertaking research for *The Forgotten Warriors: A Directory of Korean and Vietnam War Memorials and Museums*. Inquiries about this partially completed project may be directed to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Collection, Museum and Archaeological Regional Storage Facility, Lanhan, Maryland 20706).

<sup>28</sup> American wars deemed just in motive and victorious in outcome include the Revolutionary War and the two world wars. Into this same category, most Northerners would place the Civil War. Generally regarded as victories but condemned by many contemporaries and succeeding generations as having been waged for dubious moral and political reasons are the War of 1812, the Mexican War, the Indian Wars, and the Spanish-American War. The single war that was nobly, but unsuccessfully, fought was the Civil War, as perceived by Southerners. To these different categories of war correspond different volumes and different qualities of commemoration (Mayo 1988).

<sup>29</sup> These judgments and their inhibiting effect on the creation of traditional commemorative devices are more vividly realized in post-World War II Germany than in post-Vietnam War America. Unlike America's, Germany's defeat was literally shattering; its cause regarded as not merely misguided (as many perceived America's to have been in Vietnam), but evil in conception and act; its memories borne in a silence deeper than America has ever known.

justification, resembles the Vietnam War in its lack of positive military or moral qualities. The two wars also share a relatively long gap between the time of their official termination and the time a major war memorial was planned for them in the nation's capital, an adjacent location on the capital mall, and a symbolic structure that is, in many respects, similar.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the Korean War Veterans Memorial are different monuments, promoted by sponsors appealing to different constituencies; yet, they emerge out of the same ambivalent culture of commemoration. Reflecting the tension between realism and abstraction, expressiveness and restraint, each monument is a compromise between different views on how its war should be remembered and what a memorial to it should include. The Korean Memorial's structure, as originally conceived, incorporated traditional elements, including realistic images of soldiers, but these were tentatively rendered—they were “ghostly,” as one of the designers put it.<sup>30</sup> Rival designers modified this original model in two ways: (1) by making the soldiers lifelike and portraying them in a combat situation and (2) by proposing a less conspicuous memorial site. The monument-selection commission rejected the first modification but embraced the second, thus deciding against a traditional, heroic-size memorial to the Korean War. To be sure, the commission jury (made up of veterans of Korea) views the war's accomplishments more positively than the general public and it endorsed every one of the designers' traditional elements, including statues, flag, and identifying inscription.<sup>31</sup> The jury qualified its commemoration of the Korean War as an American war, however, by approving the listing of all 21 combatant nations, even though non-American foreign forces in Korea were token forces. Also, it approved an engraved numerical count of participants and casualties and agreed to name the monument for the veterans who fought the war rather than for the war itself. Thus, the elevation of the soldier and deemphasis of his cause are less dramatic in the Korean Memorial than in the Vietnam Memorial, but they are nevertheless apparent in its present design. When established on the mall, this design will, in turn, accentuate two of the Vietnam Memorial's taken-for-granted features: its honoring of men who died in a restrained “police action” rather than an officially declared war and its marking the high point, in lives lost, of the late 20th-century Cold War in Asia.

It is also our sense that the Vietnam Veterans Memorial's successful separation of participant and cause and its attendant elevation of the

<sup>30</sup> Personal communication from Donald A. Leon of Pennsylvania State University.

<sup>31</sup> Images of the Korean War participants, including women, will be engraved on the Memorial's walls (partly in anticipation of future demands for their inclusion). Personal Communication from Robert Hansen, Korean War Veterans Memorial Advisory Board.

participant, affected, in a way that was actually preemptive, the public sentiments and symbols of the Persian Gulf War. The profusion of yellow ribbons preceded the displays of U.S. flags and, in sheer number and points of display, predominated. The ribbons were precisely about the troops, individuals all, and were specifically focused on the troops' coming home. The U.S. flags, more directly linked to the nation and the cause, were often secondary and only proliferated toward the end of the war, that is, when the end was a sure and imminent thing.

#### THE PRODUCTION OF COMMEMORATIVE MEANING

We cannot anticipate the public's reaction to monuments that will be dedicated to the apparently prestigious Persian Gulf War. We can only affirm that the least prestigious war in American history, the war fought and remembered with the most controversy, is precisely the one whose monument is most revered and most often visited. This essential fact must be incorporated into any effort to theorize our understanding of the Vietnam Memorial. As we outlined it in our introduction, the development of a thick description of the Vietnam Memorial involved the disclosure of relevant social, political, and cultural processes. These processes were, in their substance, interactive: moral entrepreneurs interacting with their constituencies and with political and cultural authorities; politicians interacting with their colleagues and within a conservative social climate, veterans interacting with their memories and their current situations; artists interacting with politically forged competition guidelines, with denizens of the art world and with lay audiences; visitors interacting with the wall. The key to the Memorial's multifold meaning lies in this interaction web. The Memorial's ability to bring off commemoration of a dark and controversial part of the past comes to rest on the surrounding society's interaction with the Memorial itself. Whatever processes brought this cultural object into being in the first place, it is the use made of it that brings it into the life of the society. Wendy Griswold, in her outline of a model for analyzing cultural objects, notes that meaning is produced by the interaction between "the symbolic capacities of the object itself and the perceptual apparatus of those who experience the object" (1987*b*, p. 1079). We have come to understand the complex evolution of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in the same way: as a succession of interacting producers, sponsors, and audiences.

Given our effort to discover the various meanings of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, we have come to appreciate the distinctions that Victor Turner (1967, pp. 19–47) made in his own analysis of symbolic devices. Turner, in this connection, identified three levels of meaning. "Exegetical meaning" is expressed in what people say about a given symbol;

“positional meaning” is the relation of one symbol to others in a broader semiotic system; and “operational meaning” is expressed in the way the symbol is used. It is the last, the operational, meaning that most strikingly draws our attention at the end of this article. For, to a large extent, we read the Vietnam Veterans Memorial through its uses. Ironically, the memorial designed to be least visible has become the most visible because its users have opened up its spaces and extended them outward. They have done this by the depositing of items at the wall, by the creation of a vast facility for their storage and their display, by the addition to the original site of a flag and statue, by the devising of a Moving Wall, and by the establishment in cities across the land of Vietnam War Memorials that resemble the Washington prototype. In his paper on the Warsaw Ghetto Monument, James E. Young recalls Robert Musil’s statement that “there is nothing in this world as invisible as a monument. They are no doubt erected to be seen—indeed, to attract attention. But at the same time they are impregnated with something that repels attention” (1989, p. 71). Perhaps the Vietnam Veterans Memorial’s enduring visibility has something to do with its unfinished, constantly moving and expanding form. And perhaps the appeal of its commemoration without victory or consensus is also linked to its mutability—not necessarily in anyone’s intention but in the tendency of the collective processes that created it.

That the Vietnam Memorial itself is deemed a sacred site and is an object of frequent ritual also conforms to our assumption that the paramount source of its meaning is operational. The rituals that take place there, however, are not the kind Durkheim would have understood. These are not rituals that strengthen common sentiments by bringing together those who hold them and putting them into closer and more active relations with one another (1965, p. 241). We are dealing with ritual assemblies that are intense even though, or perhaps because, the volume of common thoughts and sentiments about their object is so sparse. In studying the Vietnam Memorial, we have come to believe that people may need more ritual to face a painful and controversial part of the past than to deal with a painful part of the past about whose cause and meaning there is agreement. Rituals, however, do not resolve historical controversies; they only articulate them, making their memory public and dramatic. Unable to convince one another about what went wrong in Vietnam, therefore, the men and women who assemble at the Vietnam Memorial do so with more gravity than is displayed at shrines commemorating any other war.

In the end, contexts and meanings change. A day will come when the names that appear on the Vietnam Memorial’s wall are known to few living persons. On this day, the intensity of feeling evoked by the wall

will be less acute; the flags and objects that decorate the wall will be less dense; the solemnity that now grips those who enter the Memorial site will be diluted by an air of casualness; the ritual relation that now links shrine and pilgrim will become a mundane relation that links attraction and tourist. On this day, the Vietnam War will have become a less fitful part of American history. But the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, its several parts continuing to reflect different aspects of and beliefs about the war, will echo the ambivalence with which that war was first commemorated.

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