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OPPOSITIONAL VOICES IN CHINA BEACH: NARRATIVE CONFIGURATIONS OF GENDER AND WAR

A. Susan Owen

NARRATIVES ABOUT THE Vietnam war long have been a site of ideological struggle in American culture (Ehrenhaus, Chapter 3 of this book; Haines, 1986). In this war more than any other previous to it, American ideographs of "duty, honor, country" failed to maintain hegemony over the experiences of citizen soldiers and civilians alike. As Edelman (1990) put it, "Vietnam" is not simply an historical experience that yielded a legacy. Vietnam is a condensation symbol epitomizing sets of conflicting values that polarize late 20th-century America" (p. 6).

The full extent of this ideological crisis can be understood, in part, through an examination of the struggle over representations of the war in American popular culture. Although critics disagree about the aesthetic and political significance of a wide range of literary, filmic, and televisual representations, two points generally are agreed on. First, the most unpopular American war in the 20th century captured public imagination in the years after the war as a genre of popular entertainment. Second, no American cultural forum seems fully adequate to capture the experiences of participants and witnesses.

Two critics in particular focus attention on these taken-for-granted, and their insights are useful here. Rick Berg (1990) uses the work of Walter Benjamin to explain the apparent contradiction wherein fragmented "remains" of the Vietnam experience—which stubbornly "remain" in American public consciousness—cannot be "textualized" satisfactorily (read: once and for all) through available technological and cultural modes of representation. Describing the war that will not go away, he writes:

Vietnam remains, then, regardless of the ritual cleansings and willed suspensions of memory, regardless of the many memorials for the unknown dead And while it remains, it stays a problem, or to be more precise, the remains of Vietnam are problematic. What is left of the war, its fragments and its ruins, stays unrepresentable and endlessly recuperable. The many mutations mark not merely the continuing effort to misrepresent what has been lost as merely missing and possibly recoverable; they also mark the failure of our modes of cultural representation. None of the transformations satisfy. The illusion, so necessary to particular values, fails. Vietnam succeeds in challenging and foiling the ideological apparatus's modes of production. (Berg, 1990, p. 43)

In a very similar way, William F. Palmer's (1990) essay on Hollywood's Vietnam war films addresses the failure of conventional war discourse (both linguistic and visual codes) to articulate the Vietnam experience. He argues that films produced in the decade after the war failed to capture the symbolic nihilism of the war experience. For Palmer, that nihilism is "the annihilation of the self, the realization of helplessness in the face of evil so all-encompassing that . . . past lives become nothing more than sentimental dreams" (1990, p. 262). Thus, early cinematic efforts to "construct an order out of something as unstructured as the war fails in the face of consistently deconstructing texts" (p. 261). Palmer argues that Oliver Stone's film *Platoon* (1986) marked the first minimally successful cinematic effort to represent the utter abjection of combat experience. For Palmer, then, the problem of translating war into popular entertainment forms is less an issue of ideological struggle and more one of creative imagination.

In spite of both the technical difficulties and ideological constraints involved in representing the Vietnam experience, various attempts have been made to do just that. In the past 20 years, we have seen the development of a genre of literature and film about the Vietnam war and its consequences. But we must remember that literature and film are relatively elite and privileged mass media. Perhaps the most challenging test of the capacity to represent Vietnam to a mass audience is the success of programming in the televisual medium. One series stands out in this regard—*China Beach*. First broadcast in 1987, this melodramatic series ran for three seasons and garnered both viewer loyalty and critical acclaim. My purpose in this chapter is to explore both the constraints and possibilities for representing Vietnam in prime-time, fictional television. I will do so through an analysis of the narrative and semiotic structures of the series. In particular, I will examine the gendered subjectivities of the series and the tension between mainstream and marginalized voices as represented in the major characters.

CONSTRAINTS AND POSSIBILITIES OF WAR NARRATIVES

Compared with the actual sights and sounds of the front, the word *shit* is practically genteel. (Fussell, 1975, p. 331)

Three constraints, minimally, are crucial to understanding any attempt to represent the Vietnam War. Respectively, these concern the ability to represent the actual experience of combat, social conventions governing the propriety of discussing those experiences, and media-specific constraints on content. First, the experience of warfare cannot be translated easily, accurately, or comprehensively. As noted, in particular, by Benjamin (1968), Fussell (1975, 1989), Kristeva (1984) and O'Brien (1990), the horror and abjection of war creates for its witnesses a series of inchoate experiences. In *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien describes his own experience in Vietnam this way:

The angles of vision are skewed. When a booby trap explodes, you close your eyes and duck and float outside yourself. When a guy dies . . . you look away and then back for a moment and then look away again. The pictures get jumbled; you tend to miss a lot. . . . Sometimes it's just beyond telling. (1990, pp. 78-79)

A related difficulty, of course, is that no preexisting societal schemata of values and beliefs prepare witnesses and participants for what they experience in or near combat—the lived reality of warring as an active, crushing, destroying, brutalizing experience (see Hansen, Owen, & Madden, 1992). This is particularly true of modern warfare. Writing about the hermeneutics of storytelling, Walter Benjamin (1968) draws one of his examples from his recollections of the First World War. Emphasizing the difficulty of articulating the horrors of war, he observes with a frustrated incredulity:

Was it not noticeable at the end of the [First World] war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent—not richer, but poorer in communicable experience. . . . For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare. . . . A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile, human body. (p. 84)

Paradoxically, the fractured sensibilities and psychic shattering consequent to participation in war only can be reclaimed in a story. Yet, the

narrative format falsifies that experience because it creates order out of chaos. Even as the narrative delivers the storyteller from the horror of abjection—the collapse of meaning—it belies the most irreducible element of war, fragmentation.

Even if it were possible to give voice to the abjection of war, social conventions of “polite society” historically have precluded the public examination of those experiences. Fussell (1975) notes that it was not until the 1960s and 1970s that the “concept of prohibitive obscenity, a concept which has acted as a censor on earlier memories of ‘war,’ ” (p. 334) lost its totalizing grasp on public memory. Perhaps for the first time, American mass society was confronted with cinematic, literary, and televisual representations that explored taboos such as the shattered body, ravaged landscape, massacred civilian populations, and the psychic consequences of warfare for the warrior. O’Brien (1990) succinctly captures these points in the following poignant passage:

You can tell a true war story if it embarrasses you. If you don’t care for obscenity, you don’t care for the truth; if you don’t care for the truth, watch how you vote. Send guys to war, they come home talking dirty. (p. 77)

Finally, we must consider the constraints on content and technology under which the television industry operates, as well as the cultural contexts within which specific programming arises. Above all else, American television is an economic institution. Aesthetic, artistic, and substantive choices concerning content and placement of programs are determined primarily by ratings and sponsorship dollars. Because sponsors are interested in “buying” particular demographic groups, they typically wish to purchase time on programs deemed noncontroversial. In addition, television is guarded more carefully than cinematic vehicles, ostensibly because it is consumed directly in the private domestic spaces. For these reasons, then, television is the most conservative mass medium in American culture.

It is reasonable to presume, therefore, that the obscenities of war would defy the forms and formulas of this medium. Indeed, Todd Gitlin (1983) predicted that Vietnam would not be assimilated easily into the great episodic flow of prime-time television. Writing about the foibles of American television programming, Gitlin notes that in the late 1970s and early 1980s there was a great deal of interest in Vietnam among major network chiefs. He writes:

[I]t was . . . inevitable that, once the air had cleared, the networks would sidle up to the subject. The war had usurped an enormous part of the consciousness of millions, especially the generation who, by the late seventies, were

moving into middle management at the networks and starting to make a name for themselves as producers. After the war finally ended, without resolving, in 1975, they went to see *Coming Home*, read books like Michael Herr’s *Dispatches* and Robert Stone’s *Dog Soldiers*, and observed their considerable if not blockbuster success. Finally, *Apocalypse Now* and *The Deer Hunter* broke commercial ground. As Grant Tinker said, “The Vietnam thing lasted so long, it’s such a hunk of our recent history, that it isn’t surprising that everybody finally got around to it.” (p. 227)

But the brooding preoccupation with Vietnam never evolved into a bankable series. Gitlin (1983) attributes two reasons for the failure to bring a series to broadcast. First, in order to “distance [themselves] from the grinding horror of combat itself,” (p. 227) the networks approached the topic through the situation comedy genre. This approach backfired; writers and producers shrank from the possibility of “taking something as important as Vietnam and trivializing it with a twenty-two minute sitcom” (p. 236). In addition, network officials vacillated over the political ramifications of a television series on Vietnam. Gitlin reports that CBS, in particular, articulated the importance of “balancing” market positions (“reach the most number of people in a wholesome manner”) with moral positions about the uses of television. Gitlin summarizes tartly, “Hollywood’s movers and shakers are more committed to saving precious metals than to saving souls.” (p. 224).

Gitlin’s detailed account of how the Vietnam experience confounded the conventions of television meshes well with the insights of Berg and Palmer and supports the central thesis of this essay: War does not play well on television. And yet, Gitlin overlooked the fragments of the Vietnam experience surfacing in the vast flow of television programming.

Since the end of the war, the veteran had surfaced paradigmatically as a category for character development—far too often as semiotic coding for deranged or debilitated individuals—but also as fully functioning, likable characters in the detective genre and the action-adventure series. *Magnum, P. I.*, for example, was the first prime-time television narrative about “well-adjusted” veterans whose friendships were forged in part through the shared subtext of Vietnam. Recuperated through familiar forms and formulas, the characters of this series constituted a mainstream composite of the returned warrior. War, itself, was represented as the ultimate male adventure/quest; the training and experiences of war were reconstructed as useful vocational skills in a civilian context. In this discourse, the veteran was rehabilitated via mainstream liberal democratic ideologies: War is hell, but it is both a necessary evil and the ultimate adventure where

men bond, learn, grow, and profit from their shared experiences (Haines, 1990).

Other producers and writers have negotiated the constraints of the televisual medium in their efforts to explore contemporary warfare. The most obvious example is the phenomenal success of the series *M*A*S*H*, a "dramedy," ostensibly about Korea, which voiced "liberal outrage" (Berg, 1990, p. 40) and explored decidedly antiwar sentiments and storylines. Amid the general trend of "social awareness" programming of 1970s television (e.g., *All in the Family*, *Maudie*), *M*A*S*H*'s commentary on war gave American viewers some insight into the carnage of war, privileging the involuntarily conscripted "civilian" perspective of the Army Medical Corps. The medical motif of the series enabled the producers to explore representations of the traumatized human body and psyche consequent to war. In addition, this series gave us a look at war from the private spaces of the characters' personal lives. The domesticity of the *M*A*S*H* unit foregrounded the tension between private lives and the public spaces of policy-making. Although *M*A*S*H* was limited to a predominantly white, male perspective, its liberal bourgeois critique of the Korean War familiarized American viewers with a thinly disguised commentary on American imperialism and militarism.

The phenomenal success of Oliver Stone's *Platoon* ushered in an era of "realism" in the developing genre of Vietnam films (see Dionisopoulos, 1990). Few could have anticipated the explosion of cinematic representations of Vietnam following in its footsteps. In conjunction with this move to "realism" (e.g., *Full Metal Jacket*, *Hamburger Hill*), *Magnum, P.I.*, as the first coherent televisual narrative about Vietnam, and *M*A*S*H*, as allegorical exploration of Vietnam, helped to create the cultural context within which *China Beach* appeared.

Respectively, these two programs typify relatively "closed" and "open" television texts (see Fiske, 1989; Hall, 1980). *Magnum, P.I.* invited the viewer to participate in a preferred reading of the Vietnam War. Each week's show concluded with a voice-over narration by its main character, in which the moral and meaning of the episode was made explicit; the price of liberty is eternal vigilance and blood. *M*A*S*H*, in contrast, created more flexible spaces for understanding the Korean (read: Vietnam) War as ultimately senseless and wasteful, institutional claims of national purpose notwithstanding (see Barker, 1987).

What *Magnum, P.I.* and *M*A*S*H* demonstrate, then, is that although televisual texts operate within pronounced constraints, they also contain enabling possibilities. In both of these portrayals, we see evidence of the

ideological struggle to determine how we are to think about war, generally, and how we are to remember Vietnam, specifically. A polysemic reading of *China Beach* should locate both the conventions of dominant, mainstream culture and the possibilities for reading against the grain. As McKerrow (1989, p. 108) reminds us, a polysemic reading "uncovers a subordinate or secondary reading which contains the seeds of subversion or rejection of authority, at the same time that the primary reading appears to confirm the power of the dominant cultural norms."

"Subordinate" readings that contain "the seeds of subversion" are possible even within mainstream televisual texts. William Broyles, Jr., and John Sacrett Young, executive producers of *China Beach*, wove a tale of Vietnam with broad appeal for mainstream American popular culture. The relative success of the series proves that Broyles and Young were able to offer an "acceptable" translation of the Vietnam experience into prime-time American television. But perhaps more significant, the series provided glimpses of the "dark side" of the war experience: cynicism, despair, greed, murder, wanton destruction, pornographic violence, rage, cultural oppression, cultural bigotry, and human exploitation.

In its desire to avoid being cast as "just another war melodrama," *China Beach* incorporated moments of "high drama." Whether by design or accident, these moments function as openings, ruptures in the text that breach the limitations imposed by American culture's essential conservatism. These interludes were created through manipulation of the paradigmatic spaces of the central narrative; moments of radical insight and critique arose in the structured tensions between and among the series's central characters. The disruptive potential of these interludes was tempered by the distractions of a large cast and intersecting storylines. Consequently, although viewers encountered glimpses of radical critique, essentially fissures in the conventions of melodramatic storylines, they could take comfort in the familiarity of the conventional that largely characterized the series (e.g., episodic structure, stories centered on traditional gender relationships and the struggle between good and evil).

NARRATIVE CONFIGURATIONS OF CHINA BEACH

A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior, nor restrain men from doing the things men have always done. If a story seems moral, do not believe it. If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small

bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie. There is no rectitude whatsoever. There is no virtue. As a first rule of thumb, therefore, you can tell a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil. (O'Brien, 1990, p. 76)

The narrative configuration of any text is a function of three major concerns. First is the nature of the medium. I have already discussed in some detail how the televisual medium imposes cultural constraints on the possibility of storylines. As the most conservative mass medium, due to its "location" in the private spaces of the home, the representations television offers must not rupture the cultural sanctity of those spaces. Second is the syntagmatic structure of the message, the events that occur throughout the unfolding of narrative time. Finally, narrative configuration is constituted through paradigmatic complexity—how interaction among the characters gives shape to the unfolding master (or "meta-") narrative.

SYNTAGMATIC STRUCTURE AND CULTURAL CONSTRAINTS

Precisely because *China Beach* is located in the extraordinary conditions of wartime, the constraints imposed on the televisual plots it develops are all the more apparent. Syntagmatically, *China Beach* is highly conventional, "advancing the genre of recombinant melodramatic representation . . . in a self-conscious way, [illustrating] how humane collectivities cope" with chaos (Haines, 1992). Plots across episodes center on melodramatic themes of heterosexual romance, conventional role-related gender tensions, and traditional notions of good and evil, all contextualized by the Vietnam War.

Significantly, gender is the primary organizing concept in the syntagmatic flow of the narrative. This cultural imperative shapes all episodes. Moreover, through its reliance on traditional gender relationships as its central organizing theme, the series places itself safely within the conventions of the medium. (It is noteworthy that the Lifetime network markets its reruns of *China Beach* by focusing on heterosexual entanglements in the series, and it advertises the program in conjunction with "the hunks" on *L.A. Law*.)

The pilot episode of *China Beach* marked what many mainstream journalists heralded as a "woman's point of view" of war. Publications as disparate as *Rolling Stone* and the *Wall Street Journal* described the series

as a story "about women in war" (Bales, 1988; Morrison, 1988). Similarly, both the *Los Angeles Times* and *The New York Times* claimed that the series brought viewers a woman's point of view (O'Connor, 1988; Rosenberg, 1988). These assessments are all the more significant because all portrayals of war historically have been from the dominant male perspective.

Although I would agree that *China Beach* is mediated through feminized subjectivity, the series is not about women and their experiences. Rather, the producers of the series have feminized the discourse of war in order to create a text within which the warrior can articulate his experience. The combat veteran views his experience as hermetically sealed (see Hansen et al., 1992); he cannot, therefore, speak directly for himself. But the combat veteran rejects "official" explanations of the war. Consequently, the feminized voice is an effective choice for articulating the warrior's narrative. Women are not contained by the ideological constraints of masculinity. Where war is concerned, women's historical roles have been as "outsider" and "caregiver." As outsiders to traditional war discourse, women bring to the experience both a moral compass and a humane perspective. In the act of wartime caregiving lies profound grief, sacrifice, loss, bitterness, and an unusually intimate examination of the human costs of war. These capacities, plus the presumed moral superiority of the nurturing female, render the feminine voice a viable vehicle for the brotherhood, to whom all others, categorically, are outsiders. This makes *China Beach* significantly different from other televisual and filmic portrayals of the war. *China Beach* is intensely domestic politics—a relocation of the public platform for examination of public virtue.

Perversely, however, the master narrative of *China Beach* employs traditional gender constraints to illustrate how even the "best" of women are flawed mediators for warriors. This is made manifest in two ways: first, men colonize the spaces of feminized subjectivity; and second, women are created in the image of the veteran's needs (see the Appendix for character descriptions and status).

To begin, both men and women share "feminized" spaces. Positions of masculine subjectivity are filled only by warriors and by those who signify corrupt masculinity, such as industrialists, politicians, capitalists, most military officers, and war technologists, all of whom exploit the warrior. Noncombatant males and medical officers occupy "feminized" subjectivity. Since warriors are inchoate, they cannot be positioned as narrator or narratee but simply as "actors" who utter simple truths that must be understood by and through the feminized characters. Only the feminized voices "reflect." Warriors pass briefly before us, uttering terse, enigmatic

statements. The feminized characters reflect at length on these statements, demystifying them and adding their own insights in support of the warriors. For example, the feminized warrior Boonie or the black mortician Beckett often speak for the warriors, as does Dr. Richards, the noncombatant physician. The corrupt masculine roles are undeveloped, one-dimensional characters; they rarely are drawn sympathetically, and if we are invited as viewers to identify briefly with them, it is only to understand their tragic flaws.

Second, this exclusionary tale of the brotherhood positions all female characters in the image of the veteran's needs. Regardless of their positions in the master narrative—whether “the girl next door,” “the innocent virgin,” “the minx,” “the whore,” or “the spinster-bitch”—all women find themselves contained by masculine discourses as plots develop (see Meehan, 1983). In the pilot episode, for example, McMurphy is described by another female character (who clearly envies her ability to compete for male attention) as having “Hair like silk, a body like Monroe and a heart probably as big as all America.” McMurphy rejects this description, replying that she simply is “one of the boys.” Yet, McMurphy's sexuality is a prominent feature of her character and is held systematically in contradiction with her ability to be a team player (i.e., “one of the boys”). Ironically, the heterosexual desire of soldiers for McMurphy renders her defective, denying her the possibility of bonding with those with whom she strives to identify.

The gender constraints that contribute to what I believe is the central flaw of *China Beach* long have been with us. One contributing factor to the dominance of the male perspective in war narratives is that women's experiences in war have not been well documented. Recent work done by feminist historiographers and other critical scholars helps us envision the many ways in which women's lives have been, and are, touched by war (see Hanley, 1991). Given the vast silence of women's voices in conventional accounts of war, it is understandable that its narrative traditions are structured from masculine perspectives. By implication, then, discourses of war necessarily are “gendered.” And as a consequence, we need to examine the social formations that legitimate these discourse practices. One such route is the careful examination of narrative logics.

Twentieth-century narrative traditions in American culture have popularized three stereotypical roles for women during wartime. In descending order of perceived virtue and public value, these are: domestic icons of patriotic zeal (those for whom wars are fought, e.g., mothers, wives, sweethearts, sisters, daughters); nurses and support personnel (those who

comfort and sustain); and whores (the quintessentially disposable distraction for the warrior) (see Honey, 1984; Rupp, 1978).

Although most war narratives simply exclude the feminine, those that include women generally are moved along by themes of romantic entanglement between warriors and their love interests. The primary dramatic tension in these heterosexual liaisons is that women seek to tame warriors, and true warriors must resist being tamed. This sets up a fundamental contradiction that results in perpetual antagonisms between the genders: The feminine, defined by the dominant male voice, is characterized as a perceived threat; women's sensibilities inherently are corrupting of warriors. Moreover, regardless of the female role or relationship to the male, the appearance of the female in the male domain of war always is portrayed as flawed. For example, the presence of non-native (i.e., American) women in a war zone always is reducible to a matter of their choice. For American warriors, there is no choice. In addition, women often are portrayed as too weak or too virtuous to be “team players.”

Two contiguous scenes in the pilot episode of *China Beach* (which I shall refer to as “The Funeral Procession”) are pivotal for exemplifying these constraints and for illustrating how gender constrains the paradigmatic spaces of the narrative, as well. Both scenes establish for the viewers key character relationships, the central character of the series, the logic of gendered relationships, and some of the major themes that the series explored across its three seasons (see the Appendix).

The first scene centers on the arrival of a commercial aircraft bringing a variety of personnel to Vietnam (e.g., fresh recruits, elaborately coiffed female USO entertainers, and U.S. embassy staff). The closing moments of this scene are crucial for establishing a key semiotic device of the series—the movement into intense light and wind to signify “the Nam.” As the stylishly clad female USO entertainers move to the opened airplane portal, they are enveloped in that light and blowing air, which wreaks havoc with their carefully arranged hairstyles. Implicitly, then, these devices signify “the Nam's” capacity to disrupt order. Vietnam is destructive, in the sense of “de-structuring.” Hence, concerns with superficial matters of appearance (e.g., fashion, hairstyles, preening) disintegrate in “light” of the harsh realities of Vietnam.

The second scene is juxtaposed with the first and introduces us to McMurphy. The contrast to the female entertainers is startling. McMurphy's hair is unkempt, her face shows fatigue and strain, and her surgical smock is saturated with blood. The syntagmatic relationships in this scene are influenced greatly by movement on the “x-axis” (which concerns

horizontal movement on the television screen). We watch McMurphy journey from surgery to the morgue, accompanied by two corporals, wheeling a war casualty on a gurney. The manifest composition of the text suggests that they are escorting a dead soldier, much like an honor guard might escort the casket of someone greatly revered. The audio track reinforces this visual with Aretha Franklin's tune, "You Make Me Feel Like a Natural Woman"; more than merely soulful, its halting, deliberate cadence sets the pace at which McMurphy and the escorts move into "the morning sun." The illusion of a funeral procession is reinforced further as McMurphy and her escorts move left on the x-axis; their route is lined with soldiers, some of whose faces we see, others whose backs are turned toward the camera, and all of whom appear to be standing at attention. We never actually see the dead soldier, only a bloodied sheet covering a large, truncated lump, with bloody imprints on the sheet where legs ought to be. McMurphy smooths the sheet and ever so briefly caresses the still figure.

As she and the "honor guard" pass from the hospital to the morgue (from life to death), they pass through a helicopter landing pad, which is being used by off-duty soldiers as a softball playing field. She pauses to "play ball" with the soldiers who, for the most part, ignore the still form on the gurney. In the ensuing dialogue between McMurphy and Boonie (a "retired" warrior and now-recreational director of China Beach), we learn that McMurphy's tour of duty is almost completed and that Boonie wants her to "renegotiate her contract." McMurphy emphatically declines, pauses briefly to field (bare-handed) a fly ball (amid cheers and whistles of approval), and continues moving left toward the morgue. The procession is interrupted once more, this time by a pilot whose interest in her is explicitly sexual. She tells him that she doesn't get involved with pilots, "any more." He replies, "Forget him . . . I'll help." Using the refrain of a familiar song, McMurphy snaps, "But will you still love me tomorrow?" She resumes her movement left, signaling the end of the conversation, and exits off camera. The camera closes in on the pilot, who looks directly at the still form on the passing gurney and wonders aloud, "Who says there'll be a tomorrow?"

An abrupt shift of the camera next places the viewer inside the dimly lit morgue, watching with Beckett and the war dead as the doors burst open with the arriving procession. At this point, motion on the x-axis virtually stops, and an important conversation between Beckett and McMurphy is blocked on the z-axis, enhancing the illusion of depth and spatial arrangement in order to showcase Beckett's frenzied, ironic speech about the dead:

Beckett: So, what's on today's menu?

McMurphy: [Business-like] Ahhh, traumatic amputation, multiple lacerations, through and through fragment wounds.

Beckett: [As if savoring good food] Mmmm, mmmm, mmmm. And that's the way it is on patrol today in the vicinity of Da Nang, in the Republic of Vietnam.

McMurphy: [Softly, visually stunned] Beckett . . .

McMurphy's demeanor shifts from self-controlled, self-awareness to a concern for Beckett. She is sympathetic, and yet, bewildered by the intensity of Beckett's reaction to this latest arrival at the Graves Registration Unit—that there is simply no more room, that he will accept no more death. As Beckett delivers his impassioned monologue, McMurphy merely reacts. In a series of close-up reaction shots, we are invited to share their pain, grief, and shock. We listen with McMurphy as Beckett rants on about the scent of formaldehyde that he can't wash off his hands, and the absurdity of sending home semi-nude corpses because there is a shortage of dress military pants. In the final seconds of the scene, the camera takes the point of view of yet another still figure positioned inside an opened body bag. We see a low angle shot of Beckett's face as he says good-bye to the dead soldier and begins to zip the bag. "We'll miss you," he says, and the screen fades to black. The sound of zipping continues after the scene has ended visually, positioning us in the body bag with the dead soldier.

Taken together, these scenes establish the key thematic elements in the syntagmatic flow of the series: gender; the injured body; collective, ritualized grieving; and death. Gender is used to signify relationships as sexual or nonsexual and to create expectations for interaction between and among the characters. In the interaction between McMurphy and the pilot, we see the affirmation of heterosexual relationships and the cultural assumption that whereas men seek adventure, women are fundamentally wary of that untamed impulse. We also glimpse that women cannot tame men, especially men who are warriors, precisely because the warrior must remain untamed to be effective. Yet we also see that warriors seek sex with women as a distraction from the dangers of their craft. And perhaps most important, the flirtation between McMurphy and the pilot is contextualized by the presence of the gurney bearing the corpse; it is a montage constructed of images of heterosexual desire, conventional gender norms, despair, and the ravages of war.

The expressly nonsexual interaction between McMurphy and those playing softball implicitly raises the question of whether a female can ever be a member of the brotherhood. The answer comes in McMurphy's

self-observation, "Good field, but no hit." In the brief exchange between McMurphy and the "retired" and now-feminized Boonie, we see a more "fraternal" relationship between men and women. Baseball metaphors, with their attendant gender-role assumptions, structure possibilities for nonsexual interaction between men and women in a war zone. In response to her observation and her attendant declaration that she has "hung up" her "spikes," Boonie replies, "Just a slump. It's a long season." Boonie acts much like a fellow team player, exhorting McMurphy to persevere in the face of what we are to infer as discourse about "burn out." Friendly exhortation between "teammates" presumes their equality, possible only because Boonie has removed himself from the warrior class of the brotherhood. McMurphy may "play ball" as well as any female can, but she will always be "only" a female. Her insights can never equal those of the brotherhood, both because of her sexuality and because she is in Vietnam voluntarily. The latter point is underscored later in the pilot episode when a drunken, cynical McMurphy, who is ready to throw in the towel, is confronted by Richards, her immediate superior, a noncombatant male surgeon. He berates her, calling attention to the chasm that always will separate her from the brotherhood:

Just remember, though, you're not a politician, you're a nurse. See, I was drafted. You volunteered. You wanted this. Well, you got it. You found a place where you'll never be more valuable. So, get out, or finish sucking on your baby bottle and feeling sorry for yourself and come back in the time you got left and help us save some teenagers.

McMurphy's reaction to this tirade is one of weary resignation and reflection. Rather than challenging Richards's chastisement and the assumptions on which it was founded, her response reinforced the location of the character in a position of perpetual subordination and marginality. As my analysis of paradigmatic structure will show, *China Beach* may offer limited critique of the Vietnam War (and through it, of the American capital system), but never by questioning social conventions of constructed gender norms and the role that they play in perpetuating and legitimating war.

The "Funeral Procession" scene also introduces two other major themes of the series: grieving and death. The procession with the gurney sets up both conceptual and visual representations of collective, ritualized grieving for the dead. Death is explored in surgery, but the morgue is the chief locus of the discourse of death, with its flickering pattern of shadows and bright lights filtering through from the "outside" (Reflective discourse on the metaphysics of death occurs apart from the glaring light and brute

realities of "the Nam"). Beckett's concern for "his men," and his ironic monologues on the difficulties of embalming the war dead, draw our attention to the injured body and to the taboo topic of mutilation. His discourses, as well as those uttered by the surgeon, confront our sensibilities with the nature of war wounds: traumatic amputations, sucking chest wounds, "mix and matches" (injuries from booby traps), "crispy critters" (burn victims), and "veggies" for the "vegetable patch" (those who will never recover consciousness or those who will be forever emotionally or cognitively impaired).

These themes give structure to the unfolding storylines in *China Beach*. Many of them stake out new territory for commercial broadcast television; many of them are safe and familiar. Quite reasonably, those that are safe, such as the emphasis on heterosexual entanglements, temper the disruptive potential of themes such as the mutilation of human bodies in war. But in commercial television, even themes that acknowledge the "realities" of war are constrained from exploring them in ways that fundamentally challenge or disrupt the social and institutional arrangements in American society that legitimate and naturalize war. Only in specific interactions between characters—characters who, themselves, are marginalized—are there any opportunities in this forum for the serious expression of oppositional positions. This leads us to consider key paradigmatic relationships between characters in *China Beach* who give voice to ideological crisis and who speak in voices of critique.

PARADIGMATIC STRUCTURE AND CULTURAL RUPTURE

In television narratives, the range of interpretive possibilities lies in the paradigmatic complexity of character relationships that shape the master narrative. As Robert C. Allen (1992, p. 112) states, "who tells whom is just as important as what is being related." Characters in narratives are not merely "individuals." Each character is the embodiment of a "type," a social category defined by the expression of a particular constellation of social norms and attitudes. The paradigmatic complexity of a narrative is determined by its "network of character relationships" (p. 112). In *China Beach*, we find three general categories of character in the regular cast. These I have labeled Warrior, Women in the War Zone, and Feminized Males. Within each category, characters instantiate either mainstream, conventional values or they personify marginalized positions (see the Appendix for character description and paradigmatic status). The unity of this

system of character categories is anchored by McMurphy. As its central character, McMurphy embodies mainstream sensibilities. Her presence in the narrative denotes conventionality; what she sees, and how we are asked to see, conforms to culturally dominant interpretive frames. However, her absence from the narrative creates openings in the text where marginalized voices are privileged.

For example, McMurphy often is placed in dialectical tension with two marginalized characters, K.C. and Beckett. In the structured narrative logic of the series, McMurphy—a nice middle-class, white, Catholic girl from Kansas (with great legs and tight-fitting Army tee shirts)—is plunked down in Vietnam where she nurses wounded and dying American boys. She struggles to reconcile her state-side values and experience with an increasingly insane situation. Neither her middle-class upbringing nor her brief Army training have prepared her adequately for the madness she encounters at the China Beach Army Hospital.

K.C. and Beckett, however, are far less bewildered by the fragmentation and incoherence of the war; for them, Vietnam is much more a continuation of the forms of oppression that they experienced in their "civilian" lives. They give voice to the discourse of recrimination, cynicism, and despair. Referring to themselves, interchangeably, as "niggers," they articulate the experience of disenfranchised, marginalized veterans of the war. McMurphy listens to their voices—sometimes in sympathy, sometimes in anger, shock, and dismay, and always with anguish.

McMurphy's responses generally resonate with mainstream, middle-class morality. Consequently, the paradigmatic pairing of McMurphy with K.C. or Beckett serves to domesticate the rage and potential for social disruption contained in their discourses. Significantly, however, when K.C. and Beckett are paired without McMurphy's moderating presence, radical critique of American capitalist culture can emerge in the text.

Collectively, all characters in *China Beach* participate in shaping the ideological character of the narrative. As I have indicated, McMurphy functions to moderate radical discourse, while not suppressing its emergence altogether. All characters participate in shaping the narrative through one of three functions. They may serve as reasons or excuses for ideological crisis in the text. They may shape that rupture by their discourse (which, by definition, locates them as marginalized characters). Or, they may function to suppress or establish boundaries on that discourse (which locates them as mainstream).

In view of these functions, particular character pairings structure both the circumstances under which oppositional voices can emerge in the

narrative as well as the extent to which those voices will be contained by the hegemonic constraints of culturally and/or institutionally dominant positions. To appreciate the implications of paradigmatic pairings for narrative development, the character categories of Warrior, Women in the War Zone, and Feminized Males require brief elaboration.

The Warrior

This character category represents "the brotherhood," often discussed, but rarely seen. The only regularly seen Warrior is Dodger, the quintessential "bush" fighter, comfortable in the jungle and ill-at-ease in any conventional social setting. The Warrior engages the viewing audience only indirectly, through the reflective talk of Women in the War Zone and Feminized Males. The warrior is defined by four characteristics: he has killed or witnessed killing; he has been drafted or he has volunteered to serve because of ideological imperatives of masculinity and patriotism; his experience cannot be understood by outsiders; and he has been betrayed by his government (which is duplicitous) and his nation (which is ignorant and indifferent).

Women in the War Zone

Here we find the usual collection of female character types: nurses, Red Cross volunteers (donut dollies), whores, career military personnel in support positions, unseen wives and lovers back home, entertainers, and journalists. Although these "types" are "typical," they constitute the implied audience for the series. Through them, the American public is instantiated in the text.

The women's roles are played against each other to dramatize various aspects of American political consciousness. McMurphy, our central character, is the all-American girl next door. She is white, middle-class, and raised Catholic. She is conventionally attractive, sexually selective, and socially modest. She is nurturing, caring, supportive, and possessed of decency and integrity. In short, McMurphy embodies the idealization of American political consciousness: fundamentally decent and desirable, tattered and battered, but still caring and responsive to the needs of the downtrodden. One measure of the cultural attractiveness of this position is evidenced by the multiple Emmy Awards given to Dana Delaney for Best Actress in a dramatic series. The master narrative positions us

with her, this anguished, yet controlled and beautiful woman. And since McMurphy's presence in the narrative signifies preferred readings, her reactions suggest how we should "see" the Vietnam experience and, by implication, how we should "read" the veteran.

K.C. often is set in opposition to mainstream female characters. She is the calculating hooker without a heart, who occasionally falters to reveal her humanity. Although she occupies a privileged position in the text, she speaks the discourse of the disenfranchised. K.C. is cynical and relentlessly mercenary. However, her oppositional voice is tamed in certain situations. In one episode, for example, when K.C. was placed in opposition to McMurphy, we learned (by her comparative shortcomings) of the importance of decency, courage, and honesty in the face of death and uncertainty.

A relatively short-lived, mainstream character, the virginal Cherry was killed off in the middle of the series. Cherry embodies the innocence and naïveté of the American public regarding Vietnam. Blonde, diminutive, and sweet, she is altogether out of her element as a Red Cross volunteer in a war zone. An Iowan (like Radar O'Reilly on *M*A*S*H*), Cherry goes to Vietnam to locate her brother, Rick, who has been listed "Missing In Action." Through her, we come to understand how ill-prepared the American public was for the brutalities of this war. When Cherry is paired with K.C., we see just how naive she is (and Americans were) for believing in the patriotic platitudes of "duty, honor, country." In one scene, K.C. gives Cherry "the truth":

K.C.: Duty? Honor? Country? I know all about honor . . . I honor MasterCharge, BankAmericard, and American Express. . . . What do you give them? Some nice chit-chat. Then you send them out there to be shot at, or shafted, or maybe to begin a life-long relationship with a green piece of plastic that zips? [Long pause] Take off the invisible white gloves. Open your eyes. We do the same thing. Except, I perform a real service. [Speechless, Cherry leaves. K.C. smiles smugly and takes a leisurely drink of whiskey.]

Despite K.C.'s antagonism, her cunning enables Cherry to locate her brother, in an opium den, selling black market drugs for the corrupt Saigon regime. Rick has "crossed over" and can never return to "the world." He is as much a casualty of the war as the still forms on the gurneys and in the body bags. Through Cherry's mainstream, feminine innocence, we learn that Vietnam can consume the warrior's soul, just as well as his life. Using the license of melodrama, Cherry is killed "in the field," when the

fire base she is visiting is attacked. Her death embodies the loss of innocence, an important theme in the series.

Three supporting female characters constrain radical ruptures in the text. Lila, the career officer, generally insists on strict compliance with military codes of conduct. She clings to a rational worldview in the face of Vietnam's insanity and represents the "absurd" voice of the military. However, when Lila does see the incongruities of the war, she serves as reluctant witness to the institutionalized madness around her. Likeable despite her rigidity, this historian of "wars past" often laments that war isn't what it used to be. The narrative often pairs Lila with K.C. in competition for the attention and approval of high-ranking military officers. K.C. subverts the American military system and exploits its corruption, currying political favors in exchange for sexual encounters and black market goods; Lila strives to excel on merit, earned by hard work and fair play.

Lorette and Wayloo are the most frivolous and least complex of the female characters, especially evident when paired with McMurphy or K.C. Although Lorette leaves the series as Wayloo arrives, their roles are functionally equivalent. Lorette is an entertainer and Wayloo is a broadcast journalist. Much is made subtextually of the parallels between the two women's career choices; both create illusions, both "distract," and both are pivotal parts of the fictions about Vietnam constructed for the American public. Because these characters are so conventionally drawn, they function as shorthand devices to close off ruptures in the text.

Feminized Males

This category includes all male characters who are not Warriors or corrupt representatives of dominant institutions. Only three, however, are essential to the master narrative. Boonie and Beckett are marginalized; Dr. Richards is not.

Boonie is named for his past exploits as a Warrior "in the boonies." Although he is a key character from the outset, we do not discover until the second season why he is a "retired" Warrior; at that time the narrative reveals that while on a reconnaissance patrol, Boonie "fragged" a CIA special forces operative who was slaughtering Vietnamese civilians. Boonie's desire to "tell the truth" conflicted with institutional pressures to conceal what happened, "for the greater good." Ultimately, he is pressured into accepting a medal for valor in order to "build morale after Tet." Because of what he has seen and what he has done, Boonie can neither go

home nor return to the bush. Like Rick, only with moral compass intact, Boonie literally is a mis-placed person. At China Beach, he creates meaning as "lifeguard," literally preserving human life. Boonie's story emphasizes how fictionalized representations of the Vietnam War were created by the media, politicians, and the military to advance their own purposes. Reflecting on the abjection of war experience (the collapse of meaning), Boonie gives voice to the long-silenced wisdom of the veteran: "There's no truth. There's what happened and what people need to think happened. Either way, it won't change anything." Or, as many combat veterans put it, "Fuck it. It don't mean nuthin."

Like Boonie, Beckett lives "in the rear." He is marginalized by race and by occupation. His most common pairing is with McMurphy. She cares for the mortally wounded warriors until they die; then she relinquishes them to Beckett. He refers reverentially to the dead as "his men." As a measure of his connectedness to them, he occasionally sleeps in the morgue, sometimes in a body bag. Beckett appears most frequently alone or in the company of women. Warriors, in particular, avoid him. He reeks of embalming fluid; a black man, his hands have bleached white. Beckett ruptures the text by his indictment of the waste of human lives. Beckett is intimately tied to the particular, to the value of *each* human life, and his diatribes rail against a system that treats them as "acceptable losses." Paradoxically, as K.C. observes, Beckett refuses to allow his disillusionment and despair to transform into cynicism and a wholesale indictment of that system.

When K.C. and Beckett are paired, their cynicism and despairing hopefulness create the greatest ruptures in the master narrative; no clear cues indicate which discourse should be privileged. In one key scene, Beckett confronts K.C., after learning that she is selling the votes of dead American soldiers. Her mercenary cynicism collides with Beckett's maternal protectiveness of "his men" and his enduring faith in the principles of democratic idealism. The scene is set at night, during a monsoon. It takes place in K.C.'s quarters. The entire scene is composed of tight shots; its feel is claustrophobic. What begins as a confrontation transforms into a revelation of ideological commitments. As Beckett challenges K.C. with his sense of violation—with his anger, disgust, astonishment, and finally, his disappointment in her—K.C. responds by joking about necrophilia, and laying bare her utter lack of faith in a world defined by capitalism and the illusion of democratic pluralism. In the climax of the scene, Beckett justifies his allegiances to that world in terms of sacrifices already made

(much as American involvement in Vietnam was justified by citing the "supreme sacrifice" of those already killed in combat). In the following exchange, we see the ideological tension between their worldviews:

Beckett: [Extreme close-up shot] You know, where I come from, my daddy had to take a literacy test to vote. You know what a joke that was? [K.C. breaks off eye contact] A white man walks into voter registration and they hand him a book and ask him to read, "See Dick run. See Jane run after Dick." Okay, you can vote. A Negro walks in and they hand him a Chinese newspaper and ask him, "Can you read the headlines, nigger?" The Black man says, "Yeah, it says Black men don't vote in North Carolina."

K.C.: [Agitated, begins backing away from Beckett] You think democracy makes America? It's capitalism . . . cash, that's what makes America hum, and that's why I love it. What other country on God's earth lets a poor girl with a 10th-grade education make a decent buck and get out of the sewer she was born into? Huh? If my grandfather had stayed in Poland, I'd be harvesting beets right now, eating black bread and raw onions. We're both niggers. [Music begins, bass strings] I believe in the U.S. of A.! Uncle Sam, Uncle . . . Hamilton, Uncle Jackson, Uncle Abe, Uncle George. [She gestures with a handful of bills] I have a chance. [Sarcastically] In America, a poor girl can be a queen.

Beckett: Even if that's true, I'll never stop believing that there can be another America. [He exits the room, and the camera lingers on K.C.'s face. She laughs]

Though both are marginalized by their culture, Beckett clings to—and is the voice of—faith in the promise of the American dream. For K.C., that "promise" is little more than a distortive hallucination of greed and exploitation.

The final Feminized Male is the surgeon, Dr. Richards. Consummately mainstream, he is a "liberal," lecherous, wisecracking, golf-playing, cocktail-sipping, suburban physician of high skill. In many respects, he is "Hawkeye," one war removed. Although Richards rails against the war, he functions ideologically to constrain McMurphy's developing critical consciousness. The exchange between Richards and McMurphy presented earlier in this essay epitomizes that function. Paradoxically, his browbeating of the drunken and exhausted McMurphy reveals his reliance on the "ultimate" gendered basis for trivializing women in a war zone—McMurphy chose to be there, and Richards was drafted against his will.

CONCLUSION

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it "the way it really was" (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. . . . Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. (Benjamin, 1968, p. 255)

There is much in this series that moves us closer to a painful understanding of the human costs of war. In spite of the constraining conventions of the medium, the series places us squarely in a discomfiting examination of the dark side of war. We are asked to view American capitalism in the context of greed, wanton waste, and exploitation. We are confronted with the paradox of pairing war and medicine to implement foreign policy: technologies that fragment and technologies that re-assemble. Through McMurry's lapsed Catholicism and the series's reliance on themes of mysticism, we are asked to understand that no institutional religion can cope with human evil of this magnitude. The series is both a poignant, wishful tale of compassion, integrity, and decency and a shrieking, sobbing, ranting clarion call to look carefully at the fundamental moral depravity of war.

The series offered a public forum for oppositional voices to critique institutionally sanctioned and culturally popular narratives about war. Through an elaborately structured narrative logic, the veteran was enabled to "tell" his story to a sympathetic, supportive audience. And yet, the unexamined cultural imperatives in the narrative render the series fundamentally flawed. Earlier, I argued that the constraints on any televisual representation of war are so compelling that certain "distractions" are necessary to conceal any serious textual openings. Put bluntly, without McMurry's nipple shots and themes of romantic entanglement, the economic constraints of the medium would preclude broadcast of such a series. Clearly, this series cleverly manipulated conventional themes to make a place for textual ruptures such as monologues by Beckett, tirades by K.C., and thematic examination of anguish, the destruction of private lives, and death. And yet, the series ignores the ways in which the discourses of war are "gendered." Close textual examination of the series illustrates that traditional masculinity (and its implied role for femininity) are crucial to the Warrior image. As long as representations of war fail to examine social formations that naturalize war and make it desirable, attractive, and even erotic, no serious social critique is possible.

APPENDIX: KEY CHARACTERS OF CHINA BEACH

Character Type	Mainsream	Marginalized
<i>Warrior</i>		Dodger K.C.
<i>Women in the War Zone</i>	McMurphy Cherry Lila Lorette Wayloo Dr. Richards	
<i>Feminized Males</i>		Beckett Boonie

CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS

McMurphy: Central character of *China Beach*; surgical nurse; paragon of middle-American morality.

K.C.: Prostitute and black market entrepreneur; former Red Cross "donut dolly"; disillusioned and cynical.

Boonie: Self-retired warrior; life-guard and recreational director at China Beach; nice guy, emotionally scarred by Vietnam.

Beckett: Ethnic minority (African American); runs morgue at China Beach; prepares bodies of dead for return to U.S. for burial; disillusioned and filled with despair, yet eternally hopeful.

Dr. Richards: China Beach surgeon; drafted; maintains sanity through humor and sexual innuendo and verbal play.

Lila: Career officer; chief of nursing staff; works "by the book"; conventionally patriotic; middle-aged spinster.

Cherry: "Donut dolly"; youthful, blonde, virginal, naive.

Lorette: USO entertainer; out for a good time; goes to Vietnam for personal adventure and "men-o-rama."

Wayloo: Replaces Lorette in series; aspiring broadcast journalist of limited competence and large breasts; daughter of congressman.

Dodger: Quintessential combat veteran; reticent; emotionally brittle; stoic; "thousand yard stare."

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