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When Fiction Gets Real: Representations of American Cultural Issues During the Vietnam Era

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Abstract

This dissertation investigates the underlying issues in American culture at the time of the Vietnam War, through the study of three cultural texts. Historically, scholarship on the Vietnam War tends to focus on the issue of the war itself, and its impact on American soldiers and society. This dissertation demonstrates that despite the prominence of the Vietnam War in society, and cultural memory, other key issues did impact on American culture. Three main texts examined for their representation of American culture are: the television show *M*A*S*H*, the novels *In Country* and *The Things They Carried.* Each chapter discusses the way the texts both represented and evaluated the key cultural concerns of American society at the time of the Vietnam War. They also identify the ways in which the texts facilitate societal engagement in culture, and how they enabled processes of healing. These texts reveal that the United States was undergoing a period of great change and turmoil, as a result of not only the Vietnam War, but other prominent cultural issues. This dissertation uses these texts to confirm the relevance of cultural texts as representations of culture, and also their significance as methods of dealing with trauma.

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List of Abbreviations

Mobile Army Surgical Hospital (M*A*S*H*)

Introduction

The hit 1970s American television series *M*A*S*H* proved to be one of the most watched shows in television history. A comedy, it was nevertheless, one of the most influential cultural texts of the Vietnam War. Produced by Larry Gelbart, the Emmy award-winning show spanned eleven seasons in total and aired its final episode in 1983, which, with almost one hundred and six million viewers, is the most watched television series finale in American history.[1] The high viewership demonstrates the show's influence within American society. Although *M*A*S*H* retained a distinct and dark comedic tone, it offered challenging commentary on social issues, politics, social taboos, and crucially, the Vietnam War.[2] Through a veil of comedic fiction, and the setting of the Korean War two decades earlier, *M*A*S*H* created enough distance between the reality of the Vietnam conflict and modern society to make the cultural discussions more palatable to the American public.[3] As a result American society was able to consider the issues at hand, as well as the process of acknowledging and recovering from the trauma of the war.

*M*A*S*H*, the show, was developed primarily for entertainment. It began as Richard Hooker's 1968 novel by the same name, and was adapted to film in 1970 by Robert Altman.[4]

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[1] *M*A*S*H*: The Complete Season Eleven Collection*, DVD, "Goodbye, Farewell and Amen," Season 11, Episode 16, directed by Alan Alda, written by Alan Alda, Burt Metcalfe, John Rappaport, Dan Wilcox, Thad Mumford, Elias Davis, David Pollock, and Karen Hall, (USA: 20th Century Fox, 2007; Aired CBS, February 28, 1983); "Finale of *M*A*S*H* Draws Record Number of Viewers," *New York Times,* March 3, 1983, accessed May 5, 2017, http://www.nytimes.com/1983/03/03/arts/finale-of-m-a-s-h-draws-record-number-of-viewers.html; Jason Deans, "Super Bowl Ends *M*A*S*H* Finale's 27-Year Reign As Most-Watched US TV Show," *The Guardian,* February 8, 2010, accessed May 12, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/media/2010/feb/08/super-bowl-most-watched-show.

[2] Joanne Kaufman, "Larry Gelbart," *People* 49 (1998): 135, accessed on September 17, 2017, *Academic Search Complete EBSCOhost*.

[3] Linda Holmes, "Larry Gelbart, Rule-Busting Comedy Giant: Why 'M*A*S*H' Mattered," *NPR*, September 11, 2009, accessed, August 18, 2017, http://www.npr.org/sections/monkeysee/2009/09/larry_gelbart_rulebusting_come_1.html.

[4] Richard Hooker, *M*A*S*H*: A Novel About Three Army Doctors,* (London: David Bruce and Watson, 1970); *M*A*S*H*: The Movie*, DVD, directed by Robert Altman, (1970; USA: 20th Century Fox, 2006).

The film was deeply cynical and revealed darker themes, which did not garner as much

popularity as the television show. The show's comparatively lighter comedic approach and

more moderate treatment of serious issues lent itself to being more widely acceptable to

the American public. The comedic and fictional nature of the show reflects its role as a

sitcom, which, in an era overwhelmed by the weight of war, was key in drawing people's

attention away from the traumatic reality.[5] The show ridiculed people and situations, and

depicted a war less directly involved in active combat than was revealed in the daily news or

by returning soldiers.[6] In doing so, the show defied traditional sitcom narratives, by

representing war and providing critical commentary on it while the Vietnam War was still

being fought.[7] Rather than reinforcing traditional American cultural ideals, *M*A*S*H*

engaged in cultural critical evaluation.[8] In addition to being entertaining, *M*A*S*H* played

a significant role in societal engagement with American culture. Gelbart used the show as a

way to represent American culture during the Vietnam period. The characters and themes

depict and address key issues in 1970s American society, with the intention of either

confirming or challenging them. By bringing attention to these societal concerns and

providing commentary and critique, *M*A*S*H* enabled people to engage with and

participate in the development of their culture, to address their trauma and come to terms

with personal and cultural healing.

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[5] Marilyn Wesley, "Truth and Fiction in Tim O'Brien's *If I Die In A Combat Zone* and *The Things They Carried*," *College Literature* 29 (2002): 10, accessed September 12, 2017, http://jstor.org.ezproxy.canterbury.ac.nz/stable/25112634; Mark. A. Heberle, *A Trauma Artist* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2001), 18.

[6] Wesley, "Truth and Fiction," 10, 15.

[7] Andrew Martin, *Receptions of War: Vietnam In American Culture,* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), 9; Kenneth Plume, "Interview With Larry Gelbart," *IGN AU,* January 11, 2002, accessed Jun 30, 2017, Http://au.ign/articles/2002/01/11/interview-with-larry-gelbart.

[8] Holmes, "Larry Gelbart, Rule-Busting Comedy Giant."

The key issues that *M*A*S*H** addresses are the evolving nature of gender politics, the changing perceptions of the military and its role within society, the issue of the Vietnam War itself, and the ever sensitive issue of race. The show addresses these cultural representations with stylistic devices, dark comedy, and the setting, characters, and events depicted in each episode. Whether these features are used to confirm or challenge the existing culture, determines whether they draw attention to issues and facilitating engagement, or help people process trauma and heal.

In order to understand the culture of a specific time and place, it is necessary to investigate how the population constructed that culture and operated within it. In recent decades there has been a shift in the meaning of the term 'culture' and what it encompasses within the field of historical scholarship.[9] The term now refers to all aspects of what constitutes a culture, from its foundational values and traditions, to popular culture and the traditional aspects of high culture. In *What Is Cultural History?* Peter Burke suggests that the interpretation of 'culture' in historical scholarship is now more aligned with the anthropological concept. In order to discover a culture, the way in which it was expressed by the people of it, must be analysed. Cultural texts are vital in this process. Culturally reflective texts reveal people's thoughts and discussions, what they wrote about, and ultimately what they considered important enough to represent. Each cultural text reflects the convictions of those creating it, and bears the influence of the perceptions and beliefs of the intended audience. While each of the texts examined is a fictional narrative and an expression of Vietnam War experiences, this does not discount each text's validity as a

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[9] Peter Burke, *What Is Cultural History?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), 30, 33.

representation of culture.[10] Creators choose to depict what is relevant, and address issues prevalent within culture.[11] Audiences endorse texts they relate to and perceive as relevant, and that clearly and accurately depict cultural and social issues they relate to. The use of fictional narratives as a method of depicting and addressing culture does not reduce the value of these texts as cultural artefacts.[12] Popular culture is the mode most easily accessible to the general public, and through which they both create and read culture. While construction of these cultural texts can differ significantly, each text contributes to the overall process of engagement in culture. Irrespective of their content, cultural texts enable the author to portray culture, to challenge culture, and frequently, enable others to engage in culture.[13]

This dissertation seeks to investigate the state of American culture at the time of the Vietnam War. It will read this culture by examining three important cultural texts of the Vietnam era, focussing on the social issues they address, the way they treat these concerns, and how the texts make use of their medium to engage in cultural evaluation and healing.

The period of American history dominated by the Vietnam War is one defined by conflict and uncertainty.[14] The United States engaged in the war in Vietnam from 1955 until 1975, although the effects of the conflict remained within American society long after the cessation of fighting.[15] Conflicting stances on the morality and justifiability of the United

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[10] Steven Kaplan, "The Undying Uncertainty of the Narrator in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 35 (1993): 48, accessed July 20, 2017.

[11] Regula Fuchs, *Remembering Viet Nam: Gustav Hasford, Ron Kovic, Tim O'Brien and Fabrication of American Cultural Memory*, (Berne: Peter Lang AG, 2011), 12.

[12] Kaplan, "Undying Uncertainty," 44.

[13] Philip D. Beidler, *American Literature and the Experience of Vietnam,* (Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1982), xiii; Heberle, *Trauma Artist,* xv; Martin, *Receptions of War*, 55.

[14] Kaplan, "Undying Uncertainty," 4.

[15] Heberle, *Trauma Artist,* xiv; Fuchs, *Remembering Viet Nam,* 9.

States participation in the conflict were rife within American society.[16] Protests and demonstrations continued throughout the war, and societal unrest did not come to an end when the war did. Divisions within society could not be mended until America found a way to address the substantial impact of the Vietnam War. American society needed to find a way to accept the Vietnam conflict into its culture and solidify its place in historical memory.[17] Until it could do so, American society was doomed to remain divided, and American culture was to remain filled with uncertainty and unresolved trauma.[18]

This dissertation discusses a period that has been well researched in historiography. However, much of that historiography is based around the experiences and attitudes of soldiers in the Vietnam War, and primarily on American soldiers' experiences at that.[19] Much has been discussed in regards to the causes and trauma of the war, and its impact on soldiers.[20] Research covering the period immediately following the end of the war reflects on the reception of veterans back into society. This ignores consideration of American society as a whole, its experiences and the lasting impact of the war. Most significantly, these key areas of historiography focus almost exclusively on the Vietnam War as the main issue facing American society at the time.[21] Until recently, this position has neglected other important cultural concerns that plagued the United States of America before the outbreak of the Vietnam War, and continued to play a significant role for the duration of the war.[22]

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[16] Peter C. Rollins, "The Vietnam War: Perceptions Through Literature, Film, and Television," *American Quarterly*, 36 (1984): 420-421, accessed June 12, 2017, doi: 10.2307/2712741.

[17] Martin, *Receptions of War*, xvii; Heberle, *Trauma Artist,* xv.

[18] Heberle, *Trauma Artist*, 18-19; Rollins, "Vietnam War," 419; Martin, *Receptions of War*, xix, 10.

[19] Wesley, "Truth and Fiction," 2; Heberle, *Trauma Artist*, 299-300, 303; Fuchs, *Remembering Viet Nam,* 32.

[20] Beidler, *American Literature*, 19.

[21] Heberle, *Trauma Artist*, 300.

[22] Andrew Wiest, Mary K. Barbier, and Glenn Robins, *America and the Vietnam War: Re-examining the Culture and History of a Generation,* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 1, accessed May 13, 2017, ProQuest Ebook Central, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/canterbury/detail.action?docID=465331; Heberle, *Trauma Artist*, 301; Andrew E. Hunt, *The Turning : A History of Vietnam Veterans Against the War*, (New York: NYU Press, 1999): 1, accessed September 15, 2017. ProQuest Ebook Central.

This dissertation seeks to investigate this historically undervalued area of historiography by tracing the development of key social issues throughout cultural texts in order to determine how existing cultural concerns interacted with the conflict of the Vietnam War, contributing to the categorical disruption in American society during the 1970s. It is widely acknowledged that this period in American history is considered tumultuous and conflicted, defined largely by the Vietnam War. As scholars Andrew Wiest, Mary K. Barbier, and Glenn Robins observe "… memory of the Vietnam War has been tied to assigning blame because the war has traditionally been viewed as a mistake and a national tragedy."[23] This dissertation aims to investigate through representations in cultural texts, how the broad range of cultural concerns interacted during the Vietnam War, and with the Vietnam conflict itself.

While this dissertation examines wider cultural concerns to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the period, it is limited to an analysis of various issues that were significant during the period. Due to the limited scale of this research, further investigation into the background to these issues in American society, and an exploration of why they were significant, is limited. However, it is hoped that broader interpretations of culture in Vietnam era America, the key concerns and the variety of sources for reading and evaluating culture, will prompt further investigation of culture during this period in American history, outside of traditional scholarship of the war itself.

This dissertation uses three cultural texts to read the culture of Vietnam War era America. It examines how each text depicts the key cultural concerns and how the texts relate to other contemporary cultural texts. The three cultural texts examined are each from different

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[23] Wiest, Barbier and Robins, *America and the Vietnam War*, 1.

periods of the Vietnam period, and address different experiences of the war. Throughout the Vietnam War era in America, people sought to engage with American culture, and with the trauma inflicted by the Vietnam War through the creation of cultural texts, as a way of reconciling the conflict with the repressed culture of American society.[24] Certain texts, such as Gelbarts' *M*A*S*H*,* were produced during the course of the war, as a way of addressing the war and challenge the society it occurred within. Other texts drew from the period of war, but were produced after the fact, and with the influence of hindsight, as exemplified by Tim O'Brien's novel, *The Things They Carried.*[25] Following the end of the war, a collection of cultural texts were produced, including Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country,* which reflected the impact of the war on younger generations and the lasting effects on American society as a whole.[26] Each cultural text sought to present and criticise American culture at the time, and facilitate the recovery and healing of society. They aimed to achieve this by presenting artefacts that were relatable to general American society, and palatable in the way they addressed controversial topics.[27] The most significant way these cultural texts aimed to engage society was through the use of characters and situations. Particular themes and topics were presented for consumption and engagement and key aspects of society were revealed. By presenting characters that society could relate to, cultural texts ensured that the general population was able to engage with cultural commentary by including them in processes of evaluation and healing.

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[24] Rollins, "Vietnam War," 422; Heberle, *Trauma Artist,* 301; Martin, *Receptions of War*, 5.

[25] Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990); Wesley, "Truth and Fiction," 2.

[26] Bobbie Ann Mason, *In Country,* (New York, Harper Perennial, 2005).

[27] Fuchs, *Remembering Viet Nam*, 11.

By revealing how *M*A*S*H**, *In Country*, and *The Things They Carried* each represented culture and comparing this across the texts, it is possible to establish whether any consistent cultural themes were established.

Comparisons of these texts and their treatment of cultural concerns is useful in determining the accuracy and significance of each issue. The issues reflected across all the texts confirm the prominence of the issue in society. Additionally, the establishment of these cultural similarities between texts can determine the accuracy of a form of popular culture in expressing the reality of American culture and representation of cultural concerns.[28] This dissertation shows that *M*A*S*H** is able to fulfil these requirements and is, therefore, extremely useful as a method of reading and interpreting the culture of Vietnam era America.

Through its representations of the main cultural concerns of gender politics, the military, and race relations, *M*A*S*H** reflected an American society undergoing a period of great conflict and transition, struggling to adjust to changes in its traditional culture. These struggles are representative of the general period of 1970s America.[29]

M*A*S*H* was also a critical means through which people dealt with the trauma of the war. The show's primary role in American popular culture as entertainment suggests that the show's intent was to distract people from the issues they faced within society, and in this context, the issues they faced regarding the Vietnam War. However, given the cynical and ironic tone of the show, and the creator's aim of being politically conscious and reflecting real life, the insightful provocations of cultural concerns draw attention towards those aspects of society and culture that people would rather ignore. Rather than solely

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[28] Martin, *Receptions of War*, xxi.
[29] Wiest, Barbier and Robins, *America and the Vietnam War*, 1-2.

providing the traditional form of escapism typically facilitated by popular culture,

M*A*S*H* forces engagement in cultural and societal concerns. As it participates in cultural

evaluation, the show depicts situations and characters relevant to the Vietnam experience.

Despite the Korean War setting, *M*A*S*H** is immersed in the influence of the Vietnam

War by its creators and its intended audience. The anachronism of the show forced its

audiences to keep remembering Vietnam, its impact, and cultural conflict, rather than

allowing them to forget. In distancing itself from the immediate situation of the Vietnam

War, *M*A*S*H** still retained aspects of familiarity to American society contemporary to

the Vietnam period.[30] This was done in order to retain some relatability for viewers. The

result of this displacement of 1970s American society into the context of the Korean War, is

that the 4077th *M*A*S*H** unit is a veritable representation of general American society. By

providing a way to voice the trauma of Vietnam, and as a method of indirect remembering,

M*A*S*H*, tempered by comedy and the distance of a fictional setting, was able to provide

a relatable and palatable means of revisiting Vietnam in order to help people deal with their

personal, and societal healing. Given that the show was so heavily rooted in the context of

the Vietnam War, it is significant that the first three seasons coincided with the final three

years of the Vietnam War, from 1972 to 1975. While the show displays a certain degree of

verisimilitude, there were still limits placed on the show because it was being produced

while the Vietnam War was still being fought. Since the endings of both season three and

the Vietnam War were concurrent, this dissertation will examine only the first three seasons

of the show. This is an apt point in the show to limit analysis as it also constitutes the point

at which several thematic and production changes occur, in particular, a change in direction

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[30] Kaplan, "Undying Uncertainty," 48.

and tone, and the departure of several main characters, such as Captain 'Trapper' John McIntyre and Lieutenant Colonel Henry Blake.

M*A*S*H* does not provide answers to the questions it raises with its challenges to cultural issues, nor does it identify methods by which people could heal or present representations of healing. Its purpose is to keep people engaged in cultural processes and to prompt people into dealing with their trauma, rather than enabling people to forget and avoid healing.[31]

These processes of cultural representation and engagement in healing are also represented in Bobbie Ann Mason's novel, *In Country*. The main character, Samantha, is the daughter of a soldier killed in Vietnam, who ritually engages with *M*A*S*H** as a way to deal with the trauma of losing her father, the trauma of a divided society and to relate to her uncle as he attempts to recover from his war experience. Samantha operates within a society that is still deeply conflicted and divided by the controversy that was the Vietnam War. *In Country* addresses several key cultural issues that affect American society during Samantha's early life, in the years following the end of the war. These discussions question the state of Vietnam era American society. Mason uses the novel to represent the process of personal and societal healing that encourages similar engagement in cultural concerns and recovery in the reader. Acknowledgement of *M*A*S*H** as a cultural text in *In Country*, is an indicator of both the immense influence that *M*A*S*H** had on American society, and its role in the processes of healing. By taking the characters and scenarios of *M*A*S*H** and applying them to her own life, Samantha is able to read the situations and issues around her in a way that she can relate to and comprehend. This enables her to better understand

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[31] Heberle, *Trauma Artist*, 18.

herself, others, and wider society. She uses this knowledge to make decisions and begins to manage her own healing and life.

Tim O'Brien's novel, *The Things They Carried*, treats engagement in cultural issues and facilitating healing very differently to the other texts. Where *M*A*S*H** enables healing, as revealed by *In Country*, it does not present representations of healing or facilitate healing within the show itself. *The Things They Carried* actually works through the cultural issues and healing process within the text. The characters are engaging in their own healing, and through them, so is the author.[32] *The Things They Carried* depicts several representations of the issues facing American society. It addresses the same key issues confronted by the other texts, yet rather than providing political commentary, the novel focuses on coming to terms with trauma and acknowledgement of key cultural concerns. In order to achieve engagement in culture, O'Brien poses several questions to the reader. However, despite the different methods of engaging in cultural concerns and enabling healing, none of the aforementioned texts provides any definitive answers.[33] They ask questions of their audiences, they raise concerns, they enable the process of healing, but they require their audiences to make their own evaluations and come to their own conclusions about issues and process their own methods of healing.

Above all, none of these Vietnam cultural texts is able to provide any sense or meaning for the war or the impact it had on American society. They each raise the issue of the meaning of war, but none provides an answer, or claims to have one. Ultimately, they leave the audience to make up its own minds but suggest that perhaps there is no meaning to be

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[32] Fuchs, *Remembering Viet Nam*, 9.
[33] Kaplan, "Undying Uncertainty," 47.

gleaned, and that accepting the lack of meaning is in fact part of the process of moving

forward.

Chapter One: *M*A*S*H*'s Representation of Culture

Gelbart used a variety of characters and situations within the setting of an American Mobile Army Surgical Hospital based in Korea to portray and address issues within American society at the time of the Vietnam War. The show, *M*A*S*H*, utilises the setting and comedic genre of the sitcom to create distance from contemporary America for viewers. By portraying the show in the setting of the Korean War in the 1950s, and using comedic fiction to moderate the content of the show, it created relative distance from the troubling and traumatic experiences of 1970s America at the time of production.

The United States of America was in the midst of a period of conflict and transition during the Vietnam War era and the main issues underlying these cultural conflicts, were depicted in *M*A*S*H* as gender politics, the relevance of the military, and race relations. *M*A*S*H* used characters with controversial and contrasted gender roles as one of the key ways of bringing attention to these important cultural issues that either confirmed or challenged existing ideas within society.

Within *M*A*S*H*, the issues surrounding gender within American culture in the Vietnam period, are represented by the nurses. The portrayal of the nurses places emphasis on, and reveals the progression of, gender equality of the 1970s. The nurses reveal the increasing freedom and women's liberation within typically restrictive environments, as was occurring with the feminist movements and sexual liberation of the 1960s and 1970s.[34] By placing the representation of contemporary modern women of the 1970s within the context of the 1950s, the contrast becomes even clearer and the progress made in women's freedom is clarified. The regulated environment of the military, with clearly defined gender divides of

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[34] Wiest, Barbier and Robins, *America and the Vietnam War,* 1.

earlier decades creates the context for the expression of Vietnam era gender politics.[35] The

nurses demonstrate their sexual liberation in particular, and show a blurring of gendered

divides in the camp by the mixing of women and men in tents, bathrooms and, occasionally,

jobs. The representation of nurses in M*A*S*H* reveals the conflict between the relative

freedoms of women in American society by the 1970s with the lingering notions of the rigid,

repressive traditional gender narratives of the 1950s. The nurses are also used by Gelbart to

represent the contrasting standards of acceptable behaviour and treatment of the genders.

Despite progress towards greater women's liberation, M*A*S*H* was not a representation

of feminism. The show did not call for women to be treated equally within the practice of

medicine, nor did it reduce the enduring importance of the separation of feminine and

masculine roles. Rather than taking up the cause of feminist empowerment, the show

merely represented progress made and the significance of this progress in comparison to

earlier traditional American gender narratives. Regardless of limitations in the depiction of

the empowerment of women in America, the show embraced the contrasting treatment

each gender received, particularly in regards to the context of war, as was relevant to both

the Korean setting, and Vietnam War framework. In the episode 'There Is Nothing Like A

Nurse', the 4077th Unit is threatened by an imminent airstrike, and the female members of

the camp are required to evacuate, while the men are required to remain behind.[36] This

brings attention to the discrepancy between genders in war culture that finds male

participation in combat acceptable, though the same level of participation is unacceptable

for women. This representation highlights contradictory standards applied to the different

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[35] Brenda M. Boyle, "Rescuing Masculinity: captivity, Rescue and Gender in American War Narratives," *The Journal of American Culture,* 34 (2011): 152, accessed July 19, 2017, doi: 10.1111/j.1542-734X.2011.00771.x.
[36] *M*A*S*H*: The Complete Season Three Collection*, DVD, "There Is Nothing Like A Nurse," Season 3, Episode 10, directed by Hy Averback, written by Larry Gelbart, (USA: 20th Century Fox, 2007; Aired CBS, November 19, 1974).

genders, while drawing attention to the failure of society and cultural institutions to keep progress in line with changing social trends and gender culture. The questioning of gender divisions continues with the depiction of male medical staff as they struggle desperately to do the work of the nurses when the nurses are evacuated from the camp.[37] This depicts failures of traditional masculinity and its inability to be adaptable, and consequently undermines the traditional gendered roles and divisions in American society. The sudden absence of women and femininity highlights the true nature of gendered culture. It reveals that society, as depicted by the 4077th Unit, depends on the inclusion of all genders.

Similar instances of undermining the traditional gender standards of American society are demonstrated by Captain 'Hawkeye' Pierce and Captain 'Trapper' McIntyre. They frequently display actions and behaviours typically associated with femininity, with the intention of calling into question the inherent masculinity and femininity of gender culture in American society. By displaying femininity and refusing to participate in stereotypically masculine behaviour, the two bring attention to the divided conditions and expectations of the different genders.[38] Hawkeye and Trapper rarely voluntarily participate in acts of heroism or bravery, and often perform feminine roles, such as mimicking behaviour of nurses or stereotypical female relationship behaviour. While they call attention to the traditional divided gender roles, they also ridicule the standards of masculinity they are expected to adhere to, particularly within the strictly regulated and traditional culture of the military.[39] They criticise the strict gendered perceptions applied to men within American culture, calling into question the standard that denotes the gradual liberation of women as acceptable, yet liberation of masculine constraints as impossible.

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[37] *M*A*S*H*, "There Is Nothing Like A Nurse."
[38] Boyle, "Rescuing Masculinity," 149.
[39] Martin, *Receptions of War,* 9.

The female character, Major 'Hot Lips' Houlihan calls into question the traditional gender

divides of American society by challenging the abiding masculine standard inherent within

the context of the military.[40] Hot Lips frequently displays stereotypically masculine traits, in

conjunction with her feminine identity and sexuality. In doing so, she presents a direct

challenge to stereotypical gender roles and divides in American society. Hot Lips participates

in behaviour traditionally associated with masculinity within American culture and displays

extreme competence in times of stress and conflict, more so than her idealistic male

counterpart, Burns. On several occasions Hot Lips assumes effective leadership of the camp,

over Burns, and performs well within the hospital in ways that Burns consistently fails. Her

calmness and competence in stressful war situations, shows her frequently outperforming

her male counterparts and superiors.[41] Her effective and efficient femininity and regular

performance of masculinity fundamentally refutes and undermines the traditional

masculine standard. Despite her feminine identity, she shows women to be equally capable

of fulfilling the same roles as men. Hot Lips defies almost all stereotypical masculine cultural

narratives through her conduct in the episode 'Aid Station'.[42] During the course of this

episode she is the only volunteer in a group of medical staff sent to relieve a destroyed aid

station near the front lines. The male doctors, Hawkeye, Trapper and Burns, show their

reluctance to go by drawing straws. While working at the aid station, Hot Lips competently

performs surgery on her own, despite her official status as nurse, in life threatening

circumstances, and with few supplies at hand. Her confident and efficient work under

pressure on the front lines is contrasted with scenes of Burns struggling in a fully equipped

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[40] Wesley, "Truth and Fiction," 2.
[41] *M*A*S*H*: The Complete Season Three Collection*, DVD, "Aid Station," Season 3, Episode 19, directed by William Jurgensen, written by Larry Gelbart and Simon Muntner, (USA: 20th Century Fox, 2007; Aired CBS, February 11, 1975).
[42] *M*A*S*H**, "Aid Station."

hospital theatre, with no imminent danger to his life. Hot Lips demonstrates the effective

contradiction of traditional gender culture dominated by masculine heroism and

competence, bolstered by perceived feminine unsuitability. She performs the traditional

gendered roles better than the men around her in the same situations while completely

undermining American cultural gender roles. This is also a criticism of the perceived gains of

feminine freedom in American society, particularly in terms of sexual liberation, despite the

enduring state of repressive gender roles. It clarified that women gained freedom, as long as

they remained within their traditionally feminine roles. Through these open contradictions

of stereotypical gender roles, *M*A*S*H* defied the traditional role of gender in American

society and revealed the changing gender narrative in 1970s American culture.

There are clearly demonstrated limitations in how *M*A*S*H* engaged with American

gender politics of the Vietnam War period, however, there are comparatively few barriers in

the shows portrayal of the changing significance of the military within American society.

*M*A*S*H* defied typical television boundaries by depicting narratives critical of the

military, particularly while a major military conflict was actively taking place. The Vietnam

War was a highly controversial conflict that raised significant opposition within American

society. The American military came under sustained criticism as the conflict became a

highly televised event, bringing the public's attention to the atrocities and questionable

actions taken by the military in Vietnam. In addition to the increasingly poor public opinion

of the military, the strict conditions imposed upon soldiers in Vietnam, and harsh

consequences for those who attempted to avoid conscription, large groups of American

society began to question the role of the military within American society. It had such a

significant influence over international policy and domestic culture that people started to

openly campaign against it. *M*A*S*H* actively engaged in this criticism of the American

military as part of its anti-war stance. The main way the show achieved this was through the use of characters that represented aspects of the military narrative, in order to either confirm or challenge those features of the military.

One of the characters who explicitly represents a rejection of the military is the cross-dressing Corporal Maxwell Klinger. He adopts a distinctly feminine identity in order to challenge and defy traditional military structure and regulation. He constantly attempts to utilise femininity to express his dissatisfaction with the war and his role in it, and to show an unwillingness to participate further. Klinger's challenge to the military reflected the conflict within society, and the experience of many men in America who were dissatisfied with the war and sought to be discharged from the military and Vietnam.[43] Along with the great protests and divisions the Vietnam War caused within American society, a number of men were inspired to evade conscription.[44] This represented the societal defiance and rejection of the role of the military at the time of the Vietnam War. Klinger, while a comedic challenger of gender roles, represented an important experience for many men during the Vietnam War in rejecting the military. Klinger draws attention to issues regarding the role of the military within American culture with his direct defiance of the masculine standard of the military.[45] He achieves this with his decision to wear women's clothes and embrace certain aspects of femininity. He intentionally defies the masculine expectations placed upon him and uses his femininity to criticise and mock the military, its masculine standards, harsh regulations, and its influence in American society. Klinger is demonstrably capable of performing his duties, despite his feminine attire, and so Colonel Blake refuses to discharge

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[43] Marjorie Cohn and Kathleen Gilberd, *Rules of Disengagement: The Politics and Honor of Military Dissent*, (Sausalito: NYU Press, 2009): 5, accessed September 2, 2017. ProQuest Ebook Central.
[44] Cohn and Gilberd, *Rules of Disengagement,* 5.
[45] Wesley, "Truth and Fiction," 2.

him based on his clothing and accessories, and the barest surface level hints of femininity. Klinger attempts to ridicule the military for its rigid and abiding gender separation, by taking advantage of the inherent discrimination of gender roles in an attempt to force his own discharge. Blake acknowledges the ridiculousness of the circumstances that would ordinarily allow Klinger to be sent home for presenting certain gendered behaviour, even though this is irrelevant to his ability to perform his duties, by supporting Klinger's feminine charade. Through Klinger's feminine actions, *M*A*S*H** brings attention to the negative attention being attributed to the American military within society, and also contradicts the military culture, while simultaneously mocking it.

Hawkeye and Trapper also represent societal rejection of the military and the war, by criticising the Korean War, America's involvement in war, and the place of the military in society. Both characters frequently embody feminine traits, in a constant attempt to make their military superiors and colleagues feel uncomfortable, with the overarching goal of expressing their dissatisfaction with the war and their enforced presence within it. Rather than committing to an entirely different gender and associated stereotype, as Klinger does, Hawkeye and Trapper merely blur the lines between femininity and masculinity in defiance of the rigid gendered expectations of the military structure. They are aware of the implications of their actions of casual and intentional femininity in the eyes of the military and seek to defy the expectations placed upon them. Their goal is to undermine the military, to reject its traditional ideals and mock both its diminishing role in society and its apparently poor ability to conduct war. For most of the episode 'Dr. Pierce and Mr. Hyde,' Hawkeye spends time questioning the purpose of the war, its leaders and the way it was being run, and constantly poking holes in the arguments typically put forward in defence of

participation in war, as proffered by Frank.[46] Their defiance of the military is the show's

attempt to portray both Hawkeye and Trapper's, and therefore also society's, immense

dissatisfaction with the war and their forced participation. Moderate acts of defiance

mimicked the sense of rebellion and protest occurring within society in the United States.

Unlike Klinger, Hawkeye and Trapper, who intentionally embrace femininity, the character

Major Frank Burns embodies stereotypically feminine traits with unsuccessful attempts to

present a façade of masculinity. His feminine traits are depicted as undesirable and when

they are combined with his overall uselessness and excessive patriotism, it creates a

character defined by his failure to meet the traditional military expectations of masculinity.

Burns' character represents both an exaggerated depiction of the military, and also a

criticism of it. In contrast to Hot Lips, who volunteers and participates in the harsh realities

of war at every opportunity, Burns never volunteers and more frequently displays cowardice

rather than bravery or any typical standard of masculinity required by the military. Burns is a

character who wholeheartedly endorses both the traditional gendered expectations of the

military and the significance of the military, while simultaneously failing to fulfil the

standards of the military himself. Burns' comedic lack of masculinity, ignorance and undying

patriotism, are revealed frequently as he hides in fear in during bombings and sniper fire,

refuses to volunteer, or lies to avoid personal consequence.[47] Burns' continual submission,

his displays of undesirable feminine traits, and obvious lack of traditional masculinity are

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[46] *M*A*S*H*: The Complete Season Two Collection*, DVD, "Dr. Pierce and Mr. Hyde," Season 2, Episode 5, directed by Jackie Cooper, written by Alan Alda and Robert Klane, (USA: 20th Century Fox, 2007; Aired CBS, October 13, 1973).

[47] *M*A*S*H*: The Complete Season Three Collection*, DVD, "Bombed," Season 3, Episode 15, directed by Hy Averback, written by Jim Fritzell and Everett Greenbaum, (USA: 20th Century Fox, 2007; Aired CBS, January 7, 1975); *M*A*S*H*: The Complete Season Two Collection*, DVD, "The Sniper," Season 2, Episode 10, directed by Jackie Cooper, written by Richard M. Powell, (USA: 20th Century Fox, 2007; Aired CBS, November 17, 1973).

used to challenge the capability of the military and mock the traditional role of the military in American society.

Hot Lips' is also an important character in the shows representation and discussion of the cultural concern about the military in America. Hot Lips embodies the typical masculine ideal with willing and enthusiastic participation in war culture.[48] She vigorously supports the military, its structures and the American presence in Korea, constantly takes charge of situations which arise in the 4077th Hospital, and volunteers for dangerous, life-threatening missions, such as relieving a destroyed aid station near the front lines in the episode 'Aid Station'.[49] Hot Lips' ever-present femininity while performing traditional military expectations better than the men around her inherently undermines the validity of the repressive military standard. Her competenct and successful performance of military roles also highlights the ineptitude of the true masculine military representatives, such as Burns.

While *M*A*S*H** addresses these key issues in different ways, using a variety of characters, there is one important issue that was present within American society that is barely mentioned within the show. Racism was one of the most significant cultural concerns within America, both in the 1950s and the 1970s. For the issue of race to be left predominantly unaddressed in *M*A*S*H** is a significant omission. The topic of race is covered within the show, though is almost entirely limited to representations of racism towards people of Asian heritage. This is generally relevant commentary given that both the Korean War and Vietnam War concerned Asian peoples. However, the issues concerning the racial treatment of those who many considered to be America's enemies, is less relevant to American society in comparison to the racial concerns more immediately present within the United States.

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[48] Wesley, "Truth and Fiction," 2.
[49] *M*A*S*H**, "Aid Station."

There are instances of Hawkeye calling attention to racism towards the Koreans they encounter, particularly racism displayed by Burns and nurses, and evidence of him strongly denouncing racism to the point that he bought a Korean girl in order to free her from servitude.[50] However, there are only brief mentions of racism towards American's of colour, such as when a racist white patient insists "Hey, make sure I get the right colour blood, hey doc," as he is concerned that the nurse, Ginger, a person of colour, is treating him.[51] One of the only other representations of racism towards non-white Americans is when Burns is so offended by the presence of an African American soldier that Hawkeye and Trapper invite the soldier to stay in the tent they share with Burns, in order to highlight Burns' racism and challenge it. This is achieved incredibly subtly, through implication, rather than direct verbal contradictions. This is likely because, in the wake of such conflict and change taking place within American society, and with such daring contradictions made by the show in regards to military and war concerns, the most palatable way to present an issue of such magnitude was to reference it within the context of racism less directly associated with American society. It would be comparatively easier to embrace condemnation of racism from a distance than to confront it in American communities. It is important to note the significant incorporation of racism and challenges to it in the 1970 film, *M*A*S*H**, with the inclusion of the African American surgeon and footballer, Dr. 'Spearchucker' Jones.[52] Regardless of the reasons behind the show's aversion to such an important topic, it is worth noting the

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[50] *M*A*S*H*: The Complete Season One Collection,* DVD, "The Moose," Season 1, Episode 5, directed by Hy Averback, written by Laurence Marks, (USA: 20th Century Fox, 2007; Aired CBS, October 15, 1972); *M*A*S*H*: The Complete Season Two Collection*, DVD, "L.I.P. (Local Indigenous Person)," Season 2, Episode 7, directed by William Wiard, written by Carl Kleinschmitt, Larry Gelbart, and Laurence Marks, (USA: 20th Century Fox, 2007; Aired CBS, October 27, 1973).
[51] *M*A*S*H*: The Complete Season Two Collection*, DVD, "Dear Dad… Three," Season 2, Episode 9, directed by Don Weis, written by Larry Gelbart and Laurence Marks, (USA: 20th Century Fox, 2007; Aired CBS, November 10, 1973).
[52] *M*A*S*H*: The Movie*, (1970).

exclusion of racism from other key cultural texts, particularly ones which challenged

boundaries in so many other areas of cultural discussion and conflict.

The purpose of representing and challenging these key concerns of Vietnam era American

society was to present the issues facing American culture, and to help audiences engage

with their conflicted society and with topics that were considered taboo or controversial.

Presenting the topics through popular culture made them easier to voice, and to a certain

extent, made the topics easier for many to comprehend. In addition to enabling people to

understand and discuss these important cultural topics, *M*A*S*H* was also crucial for its

ability to enable people to confront their trauma and engage in the process of healing. The

distance the show created through the backdrop of the Korean War, and the fictional,

comedic foundation of the shows genre enabled people to more comfortably confront

issues prevalent within American society during the Vietnam War. Although this distance

was key in ensuring that the controversial content was palatable, a certain degree of

anachronism was required in order to reveal aspects of contemporary American culture,

within the context of past culture. The 4077th *M*A*S*H* Unit was a key representation of

wider American society. It contained representations of important aspects of society,

various social groups and stereotypes. Within the context of the Korean War, the 4077th

Unit is definitively based in American culture rather than military culture, and constantly

defies appropriate military conduct in favour of American cultural behaviour.[53] The

presentation of key social concerns within a removed, yet relatable, context is significant as

it presents situations and issues that people would much rather forget. Rather than enabling

popular culture to be a way to facilitate avoidance and denial, *M*A*S*H* forces issues to be

confronted by its viewers, and prompts them to engage and process the issues and trauma.

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[53] Wesley, "Truth and Fiction," 10.

M*A*S*H* encourages and makes possible the acknowledgment of cultural concerns and trauma. The show presents concerns in a way which enables people to begin considering the issues plaguing themselves and their society, however it does not depict processes of actual healing within its content. Rather than guiding audiences through the process of healing through the show, it merely facilitates the journey of healing and evaluation.

Chapter Two: *In Country*'s Representations of Culture

Bobbie Ann Mason's novel, *In Country*, is very useful as a way to read the culture of American during the Vietnam era.[54] It addresses important issues regarding changing cultures of gender, the military, and race in American society. *In Country* reinforces the significance of these concerns for American culture. *In Country* confirms the processes and cultural challenges that were prevalent during the Vietnam period and reiterates them in its own reflection of the Vietnam War era. The novel's perspective differs from that of *M*A*S*H* as it was published in 1981, and includes the benefit of hindsight. However, it also allows a broader interpretation of the period, since Mason was able to perceive how situations developed in their entirety, and includes representation of the subsequent cultural progress in the period following the Vietnam War and its lingering impact on American society.

Some of the key ways Mason addresses the main cultural issues of American society, is through the main character and her relationship to others within the novel. Samantha and other minor female characters depict a contradiction of traditional gender roles, stereotypes, and divides. Through the restrictions on participation in war to those who fulfilled the masculine ideal, the traditional American gender narrative positioned the role of women and femininity as an ideal that the soldiers were fighting to defend. *In Country* reveals that by locating women as the motivation for men to go to war, it obliged women in American society to be grateful to the men, and perpetuated the gender divides within American culture. It required women to owe the men for what they experienced, for what was heralded by society, the military and the culture of war, as being on their behalf.

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[54] Mason, *In Country.*

Samantha's mother, Irene, admits that she felt trapped by her apparent debt to her dead husband and traumatised brother, and by the expectations society had of her as a woman, wife and mother in the wake of the Vietnam War.[55] Irene's regret for her wasted life until she remarries is a criticism of the feminine role in American culture, to be acted upon by masculine intentions but be allocated no ability to act themselves. Irene then abandons the female role of being grateful and indebted to the men who went away to fight that was demanded of her within the gender narrative. Rather than remaining faithful to her deceased husband, and taking care of her incapacitated brother indefinitely, she moves on with her own life, processes her own trauma, and remarries. She entirely rejects the feminine role dictated to her by the lingering culture of gendered roles. In a similar way, Samantha acts in defiance of the feminine role expected of her within traditional American gender culture. Rather than fulfilling the expectation that she marry young, have children, settle down and care for her uncle for the rest of her life, Samantha rejects the path laid out for her. She follows her dreams of higher education at the expense of her relationship with her boyfriend, and the stereotypical life laid out for her.

In its own representation of healing, *In Country* incorporates the show *M*A*S*H** into its plot as a key feature of Samantha's life. *M*A*S*H** is used within the novel as a way through which Samantha is able process trauma and cultural issues. She applies the characters and situations from the show to the people and circumstances in her own life, in order to make them as relatable to her as the show. She then uses her interpretations to understand the people around her and the situations she finds herself in. Samantha applies the framework of *M*A*S*H** as a coping mechanism for similar situations within her own life.

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[55] Mason, *In Country,* 167, 171.

Samantha also uses *M*A*S*H** as a method for remembering, rather than ignoring or denying issues or trauma. Her mother, Irene, tells her to leave her uncle and memories of her father in the past, to which Samantha implies that Irene merely wants her to forget about her uncle, her father and the war completely.[56] However, rather than ignoring trauma, Samantha engages with the trauma and the process of healing and moves forward, by using the show to relate and remember. Through discussions about *M*A*S*H** and Vietnam representations in popular culture with both Emmett and a love interest named Tom, Samantha manages to develop an understanding of the true level of trauma experienced by the soldiers. Significantly, she comes to understand that although she is frequently told to stop putting stock in fantastical representations of the war, these same critics cannot provide their own accounts of the war or construct more accurate representations due to their own trauma and desire to forget. *M*A*S*H** voices several aspects of the war that veterans themselves cannot convey, and it enables them to remember, within a palatable context, the Vietnam experience without having to relive all the trauma of their own experiences.

M*A*S*H* does not facilitate healing within the show itself, it merely encourages engagement in the processes of acknowledgement and healing. It does not work through these issues, nor does it come to definitive conclusions within the show. It does not provide Samantha with ways she can approach specific situations. Instead it gives her tools she can use to relate to various situations she might otherwise struggle to deal with, and from there, Samantha is able to come to her own conclusions, find her own answers, and make her own life decisions. Samantha is still forced to do the work of healing and coming to terms with

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[56] Mason, *In Country*, 167.

the world around her on her own, however the show makes it easier for her to begin this process.

Throughout the novel, Samantha proceeds to use *M*A*S*H** to read social circumstances and issues, starting with the presence of gender politics within her society. This exemplifies the significance of *M*A*S*H** in society, and its involvement in cultural healing. Through her analysis of Hot Lips and subsequent comparisons to the women around her, she identifies the women's liberation experienced by Hot Lips, and finds that the progress of those earlier changes within American gender culture to be faltering within her own society. Where Hot Lips was able to defy and transcend gendered limitations, the women in Samantha's life seem to be limited by the same cultural perceptions of gender roles, despite considerable progress in female freedom and sexual liberation. Samantha uses this evaluation of gender within her society in order to make her decision to pursue education and abandon the typical feminine role of early marriage and motherhood. This particular decision coincides with her receiving a 4077th *M*A*S*H** t-shirt and starting to identify with Hot Lips and her defiance of gender stereotypes within American society.[57] *In Country*, in addition to constructing its own narratives and criticisms of American culture, also reveals the importance of *M*A*S*H** as a cultural text, through the important and lasting impact the show had on American society. The novel depicts the same cultural concerns identified by *M*A*S*H** and constructs similar criticisms of American culture. The texts address cultural concerns and means of dealing with trauma in similar way, which reinforces the accuracy of *M*A*S*H** as a culturally reflective artefact. This positive comparison is significant for the validity of *M*A*S*H** and other forms of popular culture as cultural texts.

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[57] Mason, *In Country,* 171-172.

Chapter Three: *The Things They Carried*'s Representation of Culture

Another cultural text of Vietnam era American society is the novel, *The Things They Carried*.[58] The critically acclaimed novel, by author and Vietnam War veteran, Tim O'Brien attempts the same exploration of Vietnam era culture and encouragement of societal engagement in cultural concerns and healing as the other cultural texts.[59] The novel is similar to *M*A*S*H** as it depicts the narrator, a soldier named after the author, and his company as they experience the war in Vietnam. Within the text, various characters and situations reflect a range of Vietnam experiences, and are used to highlight issues within American culture, whilst actively challenging them.[60] The text addresses traumatic and uncomfortable situations and presents them within a fictitious narrative which distances the reader enough from reality, that the content is palatable. Through these thematic expressions, O'Brien confronts the major issues he perceives to be pervading American society since the Vietnam War, particularly certain gender divides and the place and influence of the military.[61] Unlike the cultural commentary engaged in by the show, *M*A*S*H**, *The Things They Carried* was not limited to the immediate perspective of Vietnam, war trauma and culture. The novel makes use of hindsight in its evaluation and critical representation of American culture, trauma and healing.[62] *The Things They Carried* offers a cultural text through which American society could confront its trauma and construct its own evaluation of American culture, including the culture at the time of the

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[58] O'Brien, *Things They Carried*.
[59] Wesley, "Truth and Fiction," 5.
[60] Heberle, *Trauma Artist,* 23.
[61] Catherine Calloway, "'How To Tell A True War Story': Metafiction in *The Things They Carried*," *Critique: Studies In Contemporary Fiction,* 34 (1995): 250; J. Roper, *The United States and the Legacy of the Vietnam War,* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 73, accessed August 3, 2017, *Proquest Ebook Central.*
[62] Wesley, "Truth and Fiction," 5-6; Heberle, *Trauma Artist*, 34.

Vietnam War, and the years following it.[63] It differs from *M*A*S*H** through its stylistically

unique narrative, which emphasises the trauma of the Vietnam experience over overt

cultural commentary.[64]

In contrast to *M*A*S*H** and its participation in popular culture as an influencer, *The Things*

They Carried exemplifies the use of literary high culture to deal with cultural concerns and

healing, as the novel earned a place within the classics of Vietnam literature.[65] Despite

recognition of the novel as a foremost piece of Vietnam War literature, this qualification is

in defiance of O'Brien's intention for the work.[66] Much like the content and thematic

depictions of culture within the novel, the novel itself defies any rigid classifications.

The Things They Carried identifies and reflects similar concepts of the issues of gender

politics, military concerns, and race to those of *M*A*S*H** and *In Country*. *The Things They*

Carried was written after the end of the Vietnam War, and it reveals the longer term impact

that the conflict had on American society, and uses its perspective to depict the cultural

concerns which came to dominate the Vietnam era.[67] *The Things They Carried* openly

challenges discrepancies in gendered standards, as presented through the character, Mary

Anne in 'Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong'.[68] Both her feminine identity and her initial

representation of traditional femininity, followed by subsequent participation in activities

and behaviour which are traditionally masculine contribute to this evaluation and criticism

of gendered stereotypes. Firstly, her femininity and personal transformation into an

uncivilised, violent entity reveals that women are equally as capable at participation in war

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[63] Heberle, *Trauma Artist*, 308.

[64] Heberle, *Trauma Artist*, xx.

[65] William M. O'Barr, "High Culture/Low Culture: Advertising in Literature, Art, Film, and Popular Culture," *Advertising & Society Review*, 7 (2006), accessed June 2, 2017, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/202986.

[66] Heberle, *Trauma Artist*, xix.

[67] Wesley, "Truth and Fiction," 12.

[68] O'Brien, 'Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong,' *Things They Carried*, 99-125.

as men, implying that through her very being, the perceptions of masculinity in American gender culture are challenged.[69] Secondly, Mary Anne demonstrates the male experience in order to draw attention to a discrepancy between how men and women are traditionally treated in regards to war, violence and trauma within American society.[70] Both Rat Kiley's audience as he tells the story, and the reader, are shocked by the harsh situation, the drastic transformation, and are concerned at how such abominable things could be allowed to happen to a woman in Vietnam.[71] However, as Kiley points out "What's so impossible about that? She was a girl, that's all. I mean, if it was a guy, everybody'd say, Hey, no big deal, he got caught up in the Nam shit…" highlighting the discrepancy regarding the level of trauma considered acceptable to the different genders.[72] Through the specific use of Mary Anne's femininity in depicting the story, O'Brien questions the treatment of females and males according to the American perceptions of gender. By revealing situations that soldiers were forced to experience, and the trauma they were forced to bear, through the provocative character of Mary Anne, O'Brien queries the cultural standard which considers it acceptable for men to experience such intense and enduring trauma through war, if the very same situation would be so utterly unacceptable and appalling for a woman to experience. He stimulates deeper consideration and evaluation of the double standard of trauma by embodying the impact of war within an unlikely subject, throwing the discrepancy into greater contrast and making it easier to perceive.

O'Brien also uses characters and situations in *The Things They Carried* to address and challenge the traditional expectations and influence of the American military on soldiers and

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[69] Wesley, "Truth and Fiction," 12.
[70] Wesley, "Truth and Fiction," 11.
[71] O'Brien, *Things They Carried*, 116-117, 122-123.
[72] O'Brien, *Things They Carried*, 123.

society.[73] He draws attention to the conflict that was occurring within society regarding American participation in the Vietnam conflict, and the subsequent evaluations of the American military and its role in American politics.[74] The story 'On The Rainy River' depicts the narrator, Tim, as he considers his desire to avoid conscription and participation in a war he disagrees with, yet being so influenced by the significance of the military in his society that he decides to fulfil his perceived duty. At the end of the story, the narrator shares his truth, "I was a coward. I went to war".[75] The internal struggle of the narrator regarding his engagement with the military and the Vietnam War is representative of the general climate of participation within American society and changing notions of military culture.[76] Another way O'Brien addresses the changing perceptions of military culture in American society is through the titular story 'The Things They Carried'.[77] It discusses the many physical items each soldiers carried upon his person in Vietnam, the symbolic objects they carried, the associated emotional burdens, and the psychological burdens they carried upon their return home. The theme of the story is continued throughout several other stories in the novel, with the purpose of drawing attention to the traditional culture of the military, its gendered expectations of participation and trauma, and its inherent masculinity. The nature of the psychological burdens are related to the guilt of killing people and of general participation in the Vietnam War. This is demonstrated in 'Good Form' by the narrator's admission of guilt for his involvement in the death of a Vietnamese boy.[78] This is important as a direct contradiction of the heroic narrative inherent within military culture.[79] Within traditional

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[73] Wesley, "Truth and Fiction," 10.

[74] Heberle, *Trauma Artist*, 37.

[75] O'Brien, 'On The Rainy River,' *Things They Carried*, 63.

[76] Heberle, *Trauma Artist*, 52.

[77] O'Brien, 'The Things They Carried,' *Things They Carried*, 1-25.

[78] O'Brien, 'Good Form,' *Thing They Carried,* 203-204.

[79] Wesley, "Truth and Fiction," 12.

American military narratives, killing and violence is generally praised, and any notion of guilt is redundant. By depicting such evident contradictions of these traditional narratives, *The Things They Carried* highlights problematic military traditions within Vietnam era American culture.

One of the key differences between cultural texts is how they enable people to deal with their own personal healing. *The Things They Carried* pursues the issue of trauma and healing differently. In addition to bringing attention to the main issues concerning American society following the Vietnam War, the novel presents various processes for healing and dealing with trauma.[80] The text itself reflects a process of healing, as O'Brien used his writing to enable him to deal with his own Vietnam trauma.[81] Through engaging with the trauma experienced by the characters in the novel, and following them through their journey to process the trauma and healing, *The Things They Carried* engages cultural texts as a way to process culture and come to terms with it, more than *M*A*S*H**, or *In Country* did.[82] Each of these cultural texts suggests the importance of remembering experiences, people, and the war, in order to ensure that both individuals and society do not become complacent. They facilitate a desire to remember and not let repression overwhelm a society in conflict with itself. However, they leave the responsibility of pursuing, evaluation and healing in the hands of the audience.[83]

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[80] Heberle, *Trauma Artist*, xxi, xxii, 9.
[81] Kaplan, "Undying Uncertainty," 51; Heberle, *Trauma Artist*, 3.
[82] Heberle, *Trauma Artist,* 15, 16.
[83] Heberle, *Trauma Artist*, 19.

Chapter Four: Dealing With Trauma

While *The Things They Carried* focuses attention on key cultural concerns and represents processes of healing with which its audience can engage, and actively challenging cultural issues, the text does not present any remedy or answer to questions it poses.[84] The novel forces readers to come to their own conclusions about the different social conflicts, and requires them to be the actors in their own processes of healing. The same is to be said of both *M*A*S*H** and *In Country*. Neither text works out the answers to issues for their audiences, despite their desire to assist people to deal with cultural concerns, trauma, and the Vietnam War. Instead, they provided a way for people to address these concerns and come to their own conclusions. In light of their attempts to facilitate cultural engagement, these cultural texts do not claim to have the answers to the concerns they present.[85] While the texts encourage audiences to engage in their own evaluations, they do not insist that there is any correct way of interpreting the issues, nor do they suggest that there are answers to be found.[86] If anything, the overall theme depicted across all three cultural texts is the idea that there is no meaning to be gleaned from consideration of the Vietnam War and its role in American culture. Coming to terms with the controversial and traumatic experience is considered vital by all the texts for the healing of society and the stabilisation and progress of American culture, however they maintain that no meaning will be found that explains the war or justifies its impact. They suggest that dealing with that frustrating stalemate of cultural interpretation and personal understanding is one of the most important steps towards freeing America from the restraints of the tumultuous and conflicted Vietnam period.

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[84] Kaplan, "Undying Uncertainty," 47.
[85] Wesley, "Truth and Fiction," 14.
[86] Heberle, *Trauma Artist*, 37; Calloway, "Metafiction," 249, 252.

Conclusion

American culture during the period of the Vietnam War is revealed through certain cultural texts. Their confirmation and rejection of various cultural concerns reflects changing attitudes within American society, particularly regarding traditional concepts of gender, the significance of the military, and race relations, and fundamentally, the Vietnam War. Despite their different intentions and approaches, the cultural texts of the period each sought to reveal aspects of American culture and expose them to critical evaluation. Each of the texts, *M*A*S*H*, In Country,* and *The Things They Carried*, discuss the concerns that each creator perceived to be the key issues facing American society at the time. That each of the texts addresses the same issues indicates the significance of those concerns within American society. This is also confirmed by the relative popularity of each of the texts. All three texts received significant scholarly and cultural acclaim in the decades following their publications, implying that not only were these cultural concerns considered important within intellectual spheres, but also within general society.

The culture of America at the time of the Vietnam War and the period that followed is defined by its internal struggles and conflict over major cultural concerns. The issues of gender, the military and race had been identified and had been changing for some time, however the sudden and overwhelming context of the Vietnam War seemed to provide society with a way of expressing their dissatisfaction, using the Vietnam War in order to reveal societal conflicts and make cultural criticisms. The war acted as a catalyst which exposed the underlying conflict within society. It forced people to engage with the issues facing society and to adjust perceptions of culture. However, it would seem that issues of

race were too great to be addressed within cultural texts, hence their relative exclusion in these three texts.

M*A*S*H* pursued representations of each of the issues facing society to varying extents. It focused its attention on representing the changing nature of gender stereotypes, and on criticisms of the military, its capabilities and role in society. However, it largely neglected addressing the issue of race within American society. Each of these issues was directly addressed with the overarching intention of discussing and critiquing the Vietnam War while it was occurring. This was the most pressing and visible concern in America. However, rather than focusing all the attention on the Vietnam War, the show used it as a way of incorporating wider social discussions.

Similarly, *In Country* used the Vietnam War and its impact on society to investigate other underlying issues facing America. The main character investigates the Vietnam War and the societal conflict surrounding the war, and, by evaluating its lasting impacts, is able to reveal the way the war affected the other cultural concerns, and the way they developed within the context of the Vietnam period. The cultural concerns included discussions on gender politics, and the influence of the military. Like *M*A*S*H**, *In Country* avoids discussion of race despite the prevalence of racial tension within American culture at the time.

The Things They Carried continues representation of these cultural concerns but similarly avoids the issues surrounding race. Like the other texts, the novel attempted to address the culture of America as it really was, not the traditional concepts of culture that society was both challenging and attempting to salvage.

The significance of these texts each revealing the same aspects of culture and addressing them in similar ways is that in doing so, they reinforce the relevance of these texts in

accurately representing American culture, and emphasise their suitability for use as cultural texts in reference to American culture during the Vietnam War. Audiences identified with *M*A*S*H** and its cultural criticisms, and also engaged strongly with the novels, *In Country* and *The Things They Carried*, over a decade later with similar depictions of the way culture was impacted by Vietnam. That the same themes and cultural evaluations were reflected within the later texts reveals the value of *M*A*S*H**, and consequently, popular culture as a cultural text. Representations of culture with the perception of hindsight reinforce the accuracy of texts like *M*A*S*H** as a method of conveying culture.

These cultural texts presented society with the means of engaging with cultural issues. They gave voice to important concerns, and texts like *In Country* and *The Things They Carried* exemplified processes of managing or recovering from trauma. This societal engagement was vital for progress in the recovery of American culture, its reconciliation, and social cohesion.

Most significantly, these texts show that the Vietnam conflict was not the sole issue dominating in American society. Other cultural concerns were influencing American culture and fuelling internal conflicts, in addition to the Vietnam War. The numerous representations of characters in conflict and struggling with various cultural issues reveal the state of American culture at the time of the Vietnam War. The cultural texts show a pervading sense of turmoil and uncertainty within American society, with several key issues causing rifts within society. Each of these tumultuous representations of America at the time of the Vietnam War, reveal a culture undergoing great change. The cultural texts show attempts to process changes in several aspects of culture simultaneously, particularly gender politics, perceptions of the military, and race relations, in addition to confronting the

issue presented by the Vietnam War itself. As a result of these cultural changes, and

challenges to the traditional culture of American, the Vietnam War era is revealed to be not

a continuation of cultural tradition, but a time of evolution and change.

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