"Back in a World I Understood": On True War Stories about Women in Vietnam

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Abstract

In the West, we know the Vietnam War as a conflict where political, physical, and emotional borders frequently became blurred. This article focuses on the war's role in literature as such a time and place of "in-betweeness" which requires a constant switching between fact and fiction to describe. It identifies two "unbelievable" narrative elements in Vietnam War stories—the supernatural and the female perspective—to illustrate the problem inherent in calling these narratives "true war stories."

On the National Mall in Washington D.C. stands the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, designed by the Chinese-American architect Maya Lin, who was a student at the time. The memorial has stirred up controversy from its inception. Nicknamed "the black gash of shame" by critics, the black granite V, embedded in the earth, displays the names of all American servicemen who died or went missing in action during the war. To view it, the visitor has to walk down a ramp—go underground, as it were—and, while looking at the names on the memorial, sees herself reflected in the polished black slabs. With her design, Lin wanted to "cut open the earth" to reveal an interface between two worlds, "one we are a part of and one we cannot enter" (n. pag.), meaning the world of the living and that of the dead. However, the memorial could also be seen as the border between soldiers and civilians, or between the different worlds of peacetime and wartime. Though the design was submitted anonymously as part of a competition, as Lin was consulted during its construction, some veterans felt that a young woman of Asian descent had no right to create a memorial for an Asian war fought by male American soldiers.

We know the Vietnam War overwhelmingly from the perspective of the American male, the "grunt" who prowls through the jungle in search of the elusive "Charlie." Given how many different nationalities and non-combatants were involved in the war, this emphasises what writer Viet Thanh Nguyen, in his book *Nothing Ever Dies,* calls "an economy of narrative plenitude" for the Americans, while "their ethnic and racial others live in an economy of narrative scarcity" (203). When it comes to war narratives, I am primarily interested in the roles played by women and people of colour, who are so often erased from the historical record. It is interesting to reconsider the idea of two separate worlds through this lens, because women and people of colour, being minorities, find themselves part of one world but are often discouraged from entering another. The Vietnam War proves an interesting stage for their stories. On the one hand, it is remembered for its clear divisiveness, splitting American society into those who opposed the war (many of the war veterans themselves) and those who endorsed it. On the other hand, it was a messy conflict that constantly blurred the distinctions between

combatants and non-combatants, combat zones and places of refuge for civilians, and the necessity and moral repugnance of warfare. All these factors make the Vietnam War a time and place in which previously distinct worlds meet and overlap. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial incorporates this by making the visitor an active part of the memorial, using her mirror image to blur the line between us and them, the living and the dead, men and women, soldiers and civilians. Many narratives about the war echo this blurriness, often by incorporating elements that are highly improbable, supernatural or hallucinatory, so that the border between fact and fiction becomes indistinct. One example is the introduction of ghosts in the narrative, while another is moving the story's focus from the soldier to the non-combatant, especially the female non-combatant, making us question what we naturally accept as an authoritative and honest perspective in war narratives. In this essay I will examine two literary narratives that use these two elements, to illustrate how Vietnam War stories cross the line between fact and fiction. The first is the chapter "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" from Tim O'Brien's famous war novel *The Things They Carried* (1990). The second is the autobiographical novel *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* (1989) by the Vietnamese-born American writer Le Ly Hayslip, which details her experiences as a young woman living in Vietnam during the war.

What Makes a True War Story?

What fascinates me most about war stories is the claim of authenticity they usually carry. Since in many cases wartime proves to be stranger than fiction, we are inclined to believe those who claim to tell a true war story—it seems simply disrespectful to accuse someone who has been through war of making things up. However, literature is also a relatively safe medium for working through trauma (LaCapra 27). Especially in true war stories, which aim to describe how traumatic war is for most people who live through it, and how it affects people in different ways, many versions of "the truth" can exist, making the question of narrative authority and authenticity a difficult one. In addition, every narrative, whether fictional or non-fictional, is subjective by de-

fault. Every act of writing means that one person puts on paper what is in their head, and makes choices about what to include and what to exclude. Therefore, no war narrative can ever provide a truly objective account of what happened.

Yet, we see those who survived a major conflict as reference points of authenticity, who alone have the authority to talk about it and tell us what it was really like. We tend to conflate their identity with that of the war; often, they are exiled people whose homeland has been destroyed and turned into an imaginary landscape that they carry around in themselves. Consequently, the distinction between fact and fiction inevitably blurs when talking about war. As we begin to witness the gradual disappearance of those who experienced the Vietnam War, we may ask certain questions about the true war stories that have already been told, those that have never been told and those that have yet to be told. Who has the authority to tell these stories when the original characters have passed away? How can we ensure that the truth about the war is preserved and handled respectfully, and that the horrors of the past continue to serve as a warning for us in the present?

In real life, people often feel unable to talk about what they did and saw "over there" and this is where literature plays an essential role: writers like O'Brien step in and articulate the truths that others have trouble expressing, by presenting facts in a fictionalized way. The danger is, of course, that certain literary works become symbolic of a conflict, eclipsing other, similarly urgent voices. Nguyen reminds us that for a long time, Hayslip's book was the only best-selling book in the United States that portrayed the conflict from a Vietnamese perspective. Hayslip mentions how strange it seems to her to superimpose a good-versus-evil theme on Vietnam War stories: "For [the Americans], it was a simple thing: democracy against communism. For us, this was not our fight at all. How could it be? We knew little of democracy and even less about communism." Theirs, she says, was a colonial war of independence, as well as a religious conflict between Buddhists and Catholics, a class war between city and country people, and a struggle between progressive citizens and traditionalists (xvi). American reluctance to read books or watch movies from the perspective of the people they

once called their enemy inevitably creates stereotypes about those they know little about. And as Hayslip co-wrote her book with an American author, it is impossible for the reader to distinguish what actually happened, what has been embellished, and what was made up. In short, even true war stories cannot, objectively, be said to be completely true.

In *The Things They Carried,* O'Brien explains what makes a true war story. He illustrates the difficulties a writer faces in capturing contradictory truths about war, such as its ugliness and beauty, despair and excitement, and the extremities of dying and feeling extremely alive. War, like peace, defies generalization (81):

> For the common soldier, at least, war has the feel—the spiritual texture—of a great ghostly fog, thick and permanent. There is no clarity. Everything swirls. The old rules are no longer binding, the old truths no longer true. Right spills over into wrong. Order blends into chaos, love into hate, ugliness into beauty, law into anarchy, civility into savagery. The vapors suck you in. You can't tell where you are, or why you're there, and the only certainty is overwhelming ambiguity. In war you lose your sense of the definite, hence your sense of truth itself, and therefore it's safe to say that in a true war story nothing is ever absolutely true. (82)

War stories may easily become "a trite bit of puffery, pure Hollywood," without a "grounding reality." O'Brien suggests there are different kinds of truth: the truth-factor of a true war story does not depend on "absolute occurrence" or facts. In fact, it is subjective: the criterium, O'Brien says, is how much the answer matters if somebody questions whether a story is true or not (83).

It is important, however, to realise that O'Brien only identifies one type of true war story: the one about the common soldier. Nguyen points out that

> we generally do not associate civilians with war stories. There is not much fun or thrill in being a civilian involuntar-

> ily caught in war. […] For many spectators and readers, war stories must at least be fun and thrilling, even as they try to communicate the obligatory sentiment that war is hell. (227)

True war stories, then, are not necessarily "good" war stories that can be enjoyed by a larger public. Nguyen's criterium for true war stories is that they acknowledge "the inhumanity that exists within the human, and the humanity of those who appear inhuman" to us, like enemies and refugees. Central to a true war story is the challenging of identity:

> … because war radically changes identity, from the soldier who must confront himself as well as the enemy on the battlefield to the civilian who discovers she is less than human when she becomes a refugee. Blown up, dismembered, wasted bodies on the battlefield also fundamentally disturb human identity for those who killed them, witnessed their demise, or buried them. Those bodies also unsettle national identity when a country divides itself over a controversial war. […] The false war story affirms in sentimental, selective, and dishonest ways the idea that 'we'—its protagonists and its audience—are human. […] A good or great true war story forcefully articulates war's challenge to identity and humanity in content and form, balancing the tension between war's degrading nature and the need to make the grade as a war story. (245)

Essential, then, to the truth-factor of a true war story is not just the content, but also "the way in which the story is told, heard and passed on" (247). In this sense, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial also tells a true war story, by focusing on the ideas about identity that arise when a visitor sees a person's name in that context.

Ghosts and the Vietnam War

In "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong," O'Brien presents us with an unlikely story. The soldier Rat Kiley, who tells the story, has "a reputation for exaggeration and overstatement" but "it wasn't a question of deceit" (89). O'Brien highlights the inevitable subjectivity that forms the essential paradox of the true war story: "Facts were formed by sensation, not the other way around" (89). As readers who identify with Rat's audience, then, we are aware from the get-go that the story may not be true. It is set in a relatively safe and isolated medical compound that is also used as a local base by the Green Berets, special forces known as "loners," who go on patrol for weeks at the time, with nobody knowing what exactly they get up to. The compound is located in the misty mountains near Tra Bong, letting the reader know that it will be a ghost story of sorts. The uncanny nature of the terrain alienated American soldiers from the start: a staple in many war narratives is the fight against the jungle itself beside the fight against the Viet Cong, though in many cases they are conflated—the people are simply another type of vicious jungle-dwellers, like poisonous snakes and mosquitoes. Soldiers in Vietnam War stories often subscribe to one of two stereotypes: those who try their best to hang onto their sanity and alienate themselves from the conflict in the process, and those who go mad, become one with the jungle and the war, but alienate themselves from the "real" world back home. They're not exactly like the "born warrior" character who seems to embody the war; in the case of Vietnam, it comes down to more than an innate fighting spirit. In his book *Dispatches,* journalist Michael Herr quotes one GI as saying: "'Aw, jungle's okay. If you know her you can live in her real good, if you don't she'll take you down in an hour. Under'" (11). Those who can "live in her" seem to have a better chance of surviving, but at the same time, the fact that they have learnt to adapt becomes their downfall; they are so far gone that they can only exist in this conflict and will perish once they are taken out of it. Either way, the atmosphere is deadly for soldiers, because they can never live in the jungle the way the Vietnamese can—using it to their full advantage while impervious to its hallucinatory grip.

Ghosts abound in narratives about the Vietnam War: dead army buddies haunt misty mountains and foggy rice paddies in a soldier's paranoid, drug-addled vision. In addition, one American nickname for the Viet Cong was "spooks," owing to their stealthy and silent night-attacks. Hayslip tells us that ghosts are an intrinsic part of Vietnamese culture, representing both distant ancestors and those killed more recently, like victims of the French Indochina War. Part of the Vietnamese identity is to honour one's ancestors on the ground where they and you yourself were born, but the uprooting and scattering of entire peasant families during the war ended this practice all over the country. Hayslip thinks of "the supernatural—of the spirit world and the habits of ghosts—the way others might think of life in distant cities or in exotic lands across the sea" (20). Where ghosts are a matter of fact for the Vietnamese, however, for the Americans they are a necessary fictional device, the ultimate indication of crossing into another world: *terra incognita*. "You were there in a place where you didn't belong," writes Michael Herr about the Vietnamese highlands, a Viet Cong stronghold where heavy guerilla fighting took place, "where things were glimpsed for which you would have to pay and where things went unglimpsed for which you would also have to pay, a place where they didn't play with the mystery but killed you straight off for trespassing" (96).

Depending on whom you ask, then, a ghost story is not necessarily about a place that is haunted because a tragedy has taken place there, where trespassing may cost you dearly. The ghostly war story is a curious in-between narrative that requires us to ask ourselves whether or not we believe in ghosts before we can decide if it is a true war story. As Nguyen points out, when it comes to ghostly true war stories, the reader never identifies with the subject, the person who died and became a ghost, but rather with the narrator, who has survived. After all, in ghost stories, the story ends after the person has died; in true war stories, "the soldier who tells the story lives on, perhaps to suffer, but still alive to bear witness" (229). Can we then trust a narrator who insists that their story is true while peppering the narrative with ghostly appearances?

Rat Kiley's story goes as follows: Mary Anne, the girlfriend of army medic Mark Fossie, flies to the compound in a helicopter to visit him.

The men stationed there are interested in Mary Anne (though none try to harm her) and she is interested in life on the base. She undergoes a near-instantaneous transformation: she visits the villages nearby, educates herself on the Vietnamese language, eats with her hands, learns how to treat casualties, gives up make-up and jewelry, cuts her hair short and starts wearing a bandana, and learns how to disassemble and shoot an M-16. The men call her "our own little native" (96). Rather than being seen as trespassing, as many American soldiers were, Mary Anne blends in seamlessly with local life. "Everything I want is right here," she tells Fossie when he suggests it is time to go home (99). Previous plans for the future—married with three kids in a lake house—are off the table. When she begins to disappear from the base at night, the men suspect she is sleeping with one of the Green Berets, but it becomes clear right away that she is out on ambush with them instead. Rat Kiley says: "'In a way she was sleeping with *all* of them, more or less, except it wasn't sex or anything. They was just lying together, so to speak, Mary Anne and these grungy weirded-out Green Berets'" (102; original emphasis). The men are not sure what to make of this; since sex is not involved, it cannot be called actual betrayal. When Fossie forbids her to go out again, Mary Anne becomes depressed. Together again, they try to keep up a façade of love and faithfulness until she escapes once more. She joins the Green Berets in their quarters, which are decorated with stacks of Viet Cong bones and signs saying "Assemble your own gook!! Free sample kit!!," and pervaded with "the stink of the kill" (110). Then, one day, she disappears completely into the jungle.

On the face of it, Mary Anne's story can be seen as a metaphor for the American G.I.'s experience in Vietnam: a virginal, fresh-faced youth is corrupted by war and driven to madness by the encroaching jungle. Rat Kiley insists that her gender has nothing to do with it, emphasising that

> she *wasn't* dumb… Young, that's all I said. Like you and me. A *girl,* that's the only difference, and I'll tell you something: it didn't amount to jack. I mean, when we first got here—all of us—we were real young and innocent, full of roman-

> tic bullshit, but we learned pretty damn quick. And so did Mary Anne. (97; original emphasis)

But it becomes clear that gender has everything to do with it. While the jungle continues to alienate and scare the soldiers, Mary Anne's identification with it scares them the most. White, blonde, and pretty, she represents every American high school sweetheart with the future dream of marriage and children, as well as the faithfulness, motherly instinct, and sexual availability associated with her gender. When she "goes native," she becomes a threat to the soldiers who feel her slipping away from them, mirroring the powerlessness they feel when facing their "spooky" enemy: "She was dangerous. She was ready for the kill" (116). The horrendous juxtaposition of Mary Anne in her pink sweater and culottes wearing a necklace of human tongues shows how she has gone from a female "giver of life" to one who takes it away and does so brutally. We know from the start that she is not like other women, but in the end, she transcends her gender and ultimately even her human form completely when she disappears into the jungle: she seems "to float across the surface of the earth, like spirits, vaporous and unreal. […] Her eyes seemed to shine in the dark—not blue, though, but a bright glowing jungle green" (105).

Mary Anne's bloodthirst is framed as something inhuman, illustrating the biggest paradox in Vietnam War narratives. Bloodthirst is attributed to the enemy, who cannot be seen as human, which makes it easier to kill them. American soldiers are expected to kill but are also expected to somehow hold on to feelings of compassion and empathy—the things that make them human. Those who become "killers" are viewed as dangerous and unpredictable. Mary Anne leaves Fossie and the safety of America, joins the Green Berets, and ultimately disappears on her own, allied with no one. She becomes "lost inside herself […] intent on some private transaction with the war," which offers her something nothing else in the world can (115). As O'Brien has made an effort to portray the American soldiers as romantic and respectful young men, the effect is that—from this male perspective—Mary Anne is portrayed as monstrous and traitorous. Even the Green Berets cannot hold

her down: "A couple of times they almost saw her sliding through the shadows. Not quite, but almost. She had crossed to the other side. She was part of the land" (116). But the events, filtered through two pairs of male eyes, beg the question whether it is her identification with the jungle that makes her dangerous to them, or the fact that she knows exactly what she wants and rejects traditional expectations of how a woman should act.

In this narrative, it would have made sense for Mary Anne to have been killed as punishment for her transgression. Interestingly, though, she escapes justice and vanishes altogether. She becomes "like" a ghost, albeit not a real one. As mentioned earlier, Vietnamese ideas about ghosts show that ghost stories need not necessarily be about haunted places and trespassing. In wartime, ghosts are not created by death alone, nor is death the ultimate punishment for a transgressive woman. More often than not, one thing that achieves both goals is rape: it may simulate death in its violence, but does not kill the victim altogether. Hayslip points this out when she talks about being raped by two Viet Cong soldiers at a young age:

> I now knew the horror that every woman dreads. […] Most horrible of all was that the act of making life itself had left me feeling dead. The force of Loy's twisted soul had entered me and killed me as surely as his knife. He could shoot me now—I wouldn't even feel the bullet. (121)

"If war makes you a man, does rape make you a woman?" Nguyen asks, referring to the *rite de passage* of suffering that forms the correlation between combat and rape (227). It does away with "the masculine fiction that war is a soldier's adventure and a man's experience, or that war —over there—can be separated from the domestic world of the family, over here" (32). Like death, rape creates true war stories, uncovering the painful truth that "while not all soldiers are rapists every army rapes" (227). Despite the commonality of sexual violence during wartime, victims are often reluctant to talk about it, afraid of the social stigma. For example, the documentary *The Invisible War* paints a horrifying picture

of rape cases in the US army, and the women and men who have to fight to be believed when reporting the event. Simultaneously dealing with the trauma of rape and the ostracization from the military environment, many victims see their lives crumble while the perpetrators escape justice. Stories of rape, while certainly backed up by statistical facts, are thus commonly seen as fiction.

Rape is a prominent feature in Hayslip's true war story, yet it is conspicuously absent in soldiers' war stories that O'Brien would call true, because there is no glory in being a rapist, no romantic trauma attached to being raped. In fact, the believability of Mary Anne's story seems to hinge upon this very fact. Due to the masculine perspective, we take it for granted that these good American boys do not even entertain rape fantasies, but welcome Mary Anne into their space without judgment, erasing the idea that her gender matters: "'You got these blinders on about women. How gentle and peaceful they are. […] You got to get rid of that sexist attitude,'" Rat Kiley reminds us (O'Brien 107). Because she fits in so seamlessly and does not suffer any physical or verbal abuse—they only call attention to her gender when they suspect she is cheating on Fossie—we forget that she is a woman at all. We are then made to believe her wildness is a symptom of her madness, when it is in fact a survival tactic: Mary Anne "goes native" as a way of freeing herself from the societal expectations she faces as a woman. By letting herself go, she demonstrates what American G.I.s, as a trope in fiction, abhor in a native woman, "the most dangerous savage and the most heroic hero. […] [T]he collective object of masculine desire, hatred and fear, especially for white men" (Nguyen 120). It is important to remember, however, that Mary Anne is ultimately *not* native and does not accept the role of the victim. Hayslip *is* a native woman, and her story reads as a constant moving between situations in which either event threatens her. Caught between the Viet Cong, the South Vietnamese, and the Americans, Hayslip decides to choose neither side, but instead tries to overcome this soul-destroying event and continue living on her own terms. This transgressive decision leads to her being threatened with rape and death time and again. Many thousands of women in Vietnam found themselves in the same situation. In fact, rape was

such a common occurrence during the war that especially in this unlikely scenario, it seems incredible that an attractive "seventeen-year-old doll in her goddamn culottes, perky and fresh-faced, like a cheerleader visiting the opposing team's locker room," is accepted so naturally (O'Brien 96).

The inclusion of rape, then, seems a worthy indicator of whether a war story is true or not. Though combat and rape create different types of trauma, their transformative power over identity is undeniable. After being surrounded by war for some time, both Mary Anne and Hayslip carry around in themselves an imaginary version of Vietnam that is established by their contact with the landscape. For Mary Anne, being in jungle combat creates and strengthens her connection to the Vietnamese landscape, making it easier for her to abandon the human world. Her suspected cannibalism—the ultimate taboo—marks the biggest change in Mary Anne's identity: the death of other human beings is what makes her feel most alive. She tells Fossie:

> "I want to swallow the whole country—the dirt, the death—I just want to eat it and have it there inside me. That's how I feel. It's like… this appetite. I get scared sometimes—lots of times—but it's not *bad*. You know? I feel close to myself. When I'm out there at night, I feel close to my own body, I can feel my blood moving, my skin and my fingernails, everything, it's like I'm full of electricity and I'm glowing in the dark—I'm on fire almost—I'm burning away into nothing—but it doesn't matter because I know exactly who I am. You can't feel like that anywhere else." (111)

Having entered the world of the Vietnam War, Mary Anne cannot go back. Hayslip experiences a similar severing of ties because of the war, but rather than reveling in the death and destruction, she grieves for the destruction and cannibalism of nature and her culture by "the American giant" (255):

> Our ties to the past were being severed, setting us adrift on a sea of borrowed Western materialism, disrespect for the elderly and selfishness. The war no longer seemed like a fight to see which view would prevail. Instead, it had become a fight to see just how much and how far the Vietnam of my ancestors would be transformed. […] Even worse, the war now attacked Mother Earth—the seedbed of us all. This, to me, was the highest crime—the frenzied suicide of cannibals. How shall one mourn a lifeless planet? (256)

As a peasant woman she is the perfect example of collateral damage and "the perfect enemy: a terrified peasant girl who would endlessly and stupidly consent to be their victim—as all Vietnam's peasants had consented to be victims, from creation to the end of time!" (126). She feels the attack on Vietnamese soil as keenly as the attacks on her own body. At the moment of her rape, being soiled, she becomes one with the soil, "no more than the dirt on which we lay. The war—these men—had finally ground me down to oneness with the soil, from which I could no longer be distinguished as a person" (125). Working in the rice fields as a teenager, she established her connection with the land through "that sensual contact between our hands and feet, the baby rice and the wet, receptive earth" (8). Now, lying on the ground among the swamp creatures, "I was only one of many beings on this island who would not see the morning sun. […] With dirt in my eyes and mouth and hair, I was already becoming part of Mother Earth" (118).

Mary Anne becomes stronger and more independent—and so, more threatening—as she figures out exactly who she is and what she wants. This includes rejecting the idea of a homeland and its expectations. Similarly, Hayslip's introduction to and interaction with the world of the Americans gives her a growing sense of self-worth. Where Mary Anne abandons make-up and jewelry, Hayslip starts wearing it to impress the G.I.s and to feel better about herself. "In Ky La, we girls were taught to hide our bodies and our feelings from men. We did nothing to make ourselves look prettier, for pretty in wartime meant danger—although for some girls it also meant money" (146). Once she figures

this out, she does her best to stay "clean" rather than become a bar girl or a dancer, but she recognizes quickly that "I would have to make the acquaintance of many people in high places—Americans included—if I was ever to emigrate from Vietnam" (341). Though initially her impression of Americans and their culture is one of lascivious hooligans and "bars, brothels, black markets and xa hoi van minh—bewildering machines—most of them destructive," the more she interacts with them, the more she respects and identifies with them. Throughout the novel, Hayslip faces the choice between the "frantic, alien terror" (xiv) of life in the capitalist world, which seems the only way to survive, and "to be free—to be back in a world I understood" (370), preserving her own pride and identity. She cannot continue to see Vietnam as her homeland; her mistreatment by Vietnamese and American men alike leads her to break with the traditional patriarchal standards of Vietnamese society. By the end of the book, her sense of self has become so strong that when she is once more threatened with rape, she decides that she "just could not let him—let any of them—get away with it any more. I would not be their victim, nor—if I had anything to say about it—would any other innocent girl" (405).

Conclusion

In this article, I have shown how by existing in between fact and fiction, narratives about the Vietnam War echo the idea of crossing a border between two worlds that we find in the sociopolitical and cultural climate of the time. Starting from the idea that true war stories are measured by their emotional impact rather than absolute facts, I take Nguyen's view that true war stories are about a change in identity: a "human" who becomes "inhuman," or vice versa. In the West, we tend to attribute true war stories mainly to American soldiers, who are often punished for crossing the border into the uncanny terrain of jungle combat. Ghosts often feature as a motif, illustrating the blurring of the borders between life and death as well as between fact and fiction, as it is difficult to say whether or not ghosts are real. These narratives thus become a place of "in-betweenness" and fluidity. I have further argued

that the definition of true war stories is gendered. For women in war narratives, rape can occupy precisely this space in between fact and fiction, as well as life and death. Whether as a key theme or a conspicuous absence, rape signifies how war can cross the border into civilian life. By studying Mary Anne and Hayslip's stories, we begin to question the credibility of stories told by soldiers that do not mention rape and its identity-altering traumatic impact, thus lacking the key characteristic of a true war story. In addition, we see how the in-between narratives become a stage for women to transcend traditional gender characteristics and expectations. In Mary Anne's and Hayslip's stories, the identity change comes about through combat and rape, respectively. They take on the fluid aspects of the narratives they are in, crossing borders between their homeland and a new country, victimhood and empowerment, humanity and inhumanity. The American woman we would ordinarily call human, given her freedom of choice and identity, becomes an inhuman part of the jungle; and the Vietnamese woman whom we might see as inhuman, who unwillingly became a refugee as a consequence of the war, emerges as fully human. Ultimately, they are able to escape punishment for their transgressive actions because of this fluidity, which allows them to cross the border to personal freedom.

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Biography

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