

**OBJECTS AT THE WALL:
CONTINUING BONDS AND THE VIETNAM WAR MEMORIAL**

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Dedicated to Gaynor, Christine and the Chien Si Vo Danh

My Guides

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the phenomenon of objects being left at the Vietnam War Memorial, Washington D.C. Since its inception in 1982, one hundred and fifty thousand objects have been left by veterans, wives and families, as well as people not necessarily related to those named on the Wall. These objects are argued to be representative of a complex expression of loss and bereavement, both by individuals and by American society as a whole.

This exploration utilises various understandings of grief and bereavement, theoretical approaches to understanding objects as gifts, and expressions of deeply set emotion through written and physical forms. It suggests that the use of these objects represents a continuous process of redefining individual relationships and that this is especially acute in relation to the Vietnam War.

The work concludes by proposing one possible interpretation of the gifting of the objects; that of continuing bonds and, in turn, will aim to contribute to a broader understanding of grief that encompasses psychological, social, cultural and political landscapes.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Chapter One: The Wall, Grief and Gifting (1-26)

Chapter Two: The Thesis (27-44)

Chapter Three: Conceptual Frameworks (45-83)

COUPLET ONE: WIDOWS

Chapter Four: Widows at the Wall (87-109)

Chapter Five: A Widow's Story: Laurent (110-144)

COUPLET TWO: VETERANS

Chapter Six: Veterans at the Wall (147-179)

Chapter Seven: A Veteran's Story: Luttrell (180-217)

COUPLET THREE: POLITICS

Chapter Eight: Cultural and Political Users at the Wall (225-254)

Chapter Nine: A Political Story: Coppin (255-281)

IMPLICATIONS

Chapter Ten: Summary (283-322)

Chapter Eleven: Conclusions (323-329)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

ILLUSTRATIONS

COVER

The Wall at Dawn (Daniel Arant: Vietnam Veterans Memorial)

INTRODUCTION (84-86)

1. The Wall in Summer (Vietnam Veterans Memorial)
2. Officer's Shattered Sword. MARS Collection (Claudio Vazquez: Turner Publishing)
3. Native American Deer Sculpture. MARS Collection (US National Park Service)
4. NVA Diary. MARS Collection (US National Park Service)
5. 'Meeting' (Danny Day: Vietnam Veterans Memorial)

COUPLET ONE (145-146)

6. 'The Wall' (Vietnam Veterans Memorial)
7. The Wall with Counsellors in the Background
8. Narrative Objects left at the Wall
9. Mothers and Wives Day

COUPLET TWO (218-224)

10. Letter with Sock Doll. MARS Collection (Turner Publishing)
11. Letter in Situ
12. Marine Combat Items. MARS Collection (Turner Publishing)
13. Combat Webbing. MARS Collection (Turner Publishing)
14. The Wall in Autumn (showing signs of the large visitor numbers)
15. Battlefield Memorial (Vietnam Veterans Memorial)
16. Marine Remembrance Service in Vietnam & 'Tiger Cage' (Allen)
17. Boots (Vietnam Veterans Memorial)
18. Veteran at the Wall (Vietnam Veterans Memorial)
19. Vietnam War Memorial Stamp and Plate (Vietnam Veterans Memorial)
20. 9th 'Aircav' Hat. MARS Collection (Turner Publishing)
21. 7th Air Cavalry Veterans
22. Luttrell's Photograph (U.S. National Park Service)

COUPLET THREE (282)

23. Aids Quilt (AIDS Memorial Quilt Foundation)
24. Tricon Protest Flag. MARS Collection (Turner Publishing)
25. MIA-POW Bracelets. MARS Collection (Turner Publishing)

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CHAPTER ONE

The Wall, Grief and Gifting

The Vietnam War Memorial in Washington DC is a chevron Wall of polished black reflective stone. It contains inscriptions of the names of every soldier and nurse who died in Vietnam, which currently stands at 58,271.¹ For many Americans, it has become a place of healing and hallowed ground.² The memorial, known as the 'Wall,' draws four million visitors a year.³ Sixty per cent of the people visiting the Wall (Appy, 2008) were not alive at the time of the Vietnam conflict. These visitors have left over 150,000 objects (gifts), which have now been catalogued and stored by the Smithsonian and the Federal Museum and Archaeological Repository (MARS).⁴

The emotional and historical dynamics of what the Wall represents are best summed up in the following:

'The irony was that...a parade of death out of Southeast Asia was leading another generation into a life of tearful memories. How long it goes on. 1942, 1972, 1992. The scars of violence are difficult to erase. But they are more tender when sustained unnecessarily. Vietnam – a tiny country barely larger than Florida and Georgia combined – somehow stole our national innocence. From 1959 to 1975 American soldier boys were

¹ Murphy (2007: 28). The Panels of the VWM are frequently removed to add additional names. The last update took place in May 2011.

² Scruggs & Swerdlow (1992: 159); Hass (1998: 57); Murphy (2007: 23, 146); Lin (2000: 14); Savage (2009).

³ Exchange of emails between U.S. National Park Service and the author, 28th Oct 2009.

⁴ Confirmed by Duery Felton, curator at MARS, February 2010, on research trip (confirming e-mail held by author).

*dribbled across the Pacific Ocean to fight and die in jungles and swamps while at home waves of their baby boomer brothers and sisters protested. An entire world watched. A generation's sensibility – of rebellion, cynicism, anger, loss of innocence, loss of confidence – was shaped by the sixteen year old conflict waged in the mud of Southeast Asia. It was less the last humiliating defeat that caused this psychic breakdown than it was the length and vividness of the bloodletting, the gradual freezing up of the national will and conscience. Vietnam – the body bags over there and the billyclubs over here – remains for many Americans the air breathed in during three decades of national trauma and tragedy. Everything from the assassinations of Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King to the political scandals of Watergate and Iran-Contra seem tainted by the original sins of My Lai and Cambodia. We can almost date the route of national pride to the Tet offensive in January 1968 or the Pentagon papers of 1971. We can trace our current civil wars to the rebellions at Kent State, Berkeley, even Watts. Guns and drugs seem as much the legacy of Vietnam as is Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. “The horror, the horror” moaned Marlon Brando at the end of Frank Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, summing up not just the war but also the national panic over the sudden loss of our way. A national PTSD. No more manifest destiny, perhaps no more destiny at all’ (Meyer, 1993: 9).*

The role played by the Wall, in this context, is summed up in the following:

‘They walk on hallowed ground. They touch the stone, they speak with the dead. They come to mourn and remember, memory mixing with grief, making an old ritual new, creating in this time another timeless moment. Seeing this, coming upon it at dawn or in the melancholy drizzle of a winter solstice, it is hard to remember that no one is buried there, that

long chevron of black granite is a memorial, not a sprawling cairn on a common grave.

It is a sad place – there is no denying that – especially sad for the volunteers and luckless conscripts who survived the war, men like me, trying to make sense of the senseless, trying to find a way to remember that will not mock the meaning of the dead.

Some men who cross the years and struggle home say they need no memorial to keep alive the memory of those cut down beside them. This is true, and yet I am pleased to see it there, stretched out under the sky a stone's throw from the Potomac River, there where Lincoln talks of the dead to us, "the living".

The memorial is a way back and a way forward. A pass through Constitution Gardens and a walk along the 'Wall' makes us think of the future in the language of the past and whatever message one draws from this, it seems unlikely that anyone who makes that walk will be able to think of war and the men who fight it in quite the same way again' (Lopes, 1987: 15).

How this is expressed through an individual's personal acts is summed up here:

'A mother travels from Baltimore to Washington D.C. She is alone. She lost her only son in the Tet offensive; she can only afford to come to the Wall twice a year. She travels up around Christmas and repeatedly at about the time (September) that her son died. She brings her loss and her pride, she still brings her questions about why (and indeed how) he died and she brings her anger, still bright and burning. She also brings gifts.

She brings an old 'teddy,' which she knows will be preserved and stored and places it at the base of the Wall. She brings Christmas cards or a small decoration for the Christmas tree that is always present at the Wall at that time of the year. She has already left her son's medals. She always brings letters, lots of letters, which are all sealed so that no one will ever open them and, every time, she brings her tears'.⁵

I will argue that the gifting at The Wall represents a complex process of loss and the bereavement suffered by individuals and, by extension, American society in general after the Vietnam conflict. This research will propose one possible interpretation of the 'gifting' of these objects, that is, as a means of maintaining 'continuing bonds' with dead loved ones and, in turn, will aim to contribute to a broader understanding of grief that encompasses psychological, social, cultural and political dimensions.

In this, I have considered alternative models of grief and bereavement, theoretical approaches to understanding objects as gifts, and how expressions of deeply set emotion are expressed through written and physical forms. I am looking at bereavement and loss as a continuous process of adjustment and redefinition of individual relationships that span more than one generation, and which are especially acute in relation to the Vietnam War.

The Wall is simply granite, rock and cement and, as an inanimate object, it is not capable of taking sides. It was constructed to be neutral and 'healing' for the American nation and the veterans. It has done this by allowing access and the expression of narratives filled with conflicted anger, pain and loss. It is neutral in that it was not built to take a position on the war, but it is not neutral in that it can be a conduit for whatever people

⁵ This story was described to me by a Park Ranger at the Wall. The woman concerned talks openly about why she is there and has talked to reporters previously. All the Wall staff said there were literally thousands of such people to be found there. This extract was taken from my personal journal, February 18th 2009.

need to send to, or project on to it (through the objects left there). The Wall has served as a focus for many conflicting and opposing views about the War, American society, politics and culture. It has become an icon for a nation that was at war not only with North Vietnam, but in a real sense, itself (Kwon, 2008).

The Wall: Maya Lin's Design

Maya Lin designed the Wall to appear as a rift or, more savagely, a 'gash' in the earth. The memorial was built, after much controversy and political infighting, almost exactly as she conceived it. At its base, the inscription reads, 'In honour of the men and women of the Armed Forces of the United States who served in the Vietnam War. The names of those who gave their lives and those who remain missing are inscribed in the order they were taken from us'.⁶

The monument consists of two highly polished, black granite wings in an extended chevron. Each wing begins at ground level and grows gradually in height as it sinks into the earth until both points meet at the vertex. At the highest point, the Wall is ten feet tall. Each wing measures 264 feet and 8 inches, and is composed of 74 separate 40 inch wide granite panels, which are numbered and inscribed. The Wall is supported by 140 concrete pilings driven 35 feet into bedrock. The total length of the Wall is 493 feet 4 inches (Lin, 2000, 2002, 2006; Murphy, 2007). The 'east' wing points directly at the Washington Monument, whilst the 'west' wing points directly at the Lincoln memorial, each panel is numbered 1-70 at its base, with West panel one and East panel one, meeting at the vertex, leading out to East and West panel 70. At the Wall's unveiling, there were 57,939 names of missing or dead service men and women from the Vietnam conflict inscribed (Murphy, 2007). This number is added to, year by year, if relatives of a deceased can prove that the death of the former service person was directly

⁶ Recorded by author on site visit January – February, 2009.

attributable to service in the conflict. In May 2011, there were 58,272 names inscribed on the Wall.⁷

Beside each name is a symbol that denotes a person's service status (missing, presumed dead or known to be dead). On the west wing the symbol precedes the name, whilst on the east wing the order is reversed. A diamond symbol signifies that the named person's death was confirmed. Those who are designated by a cross symbol were considered to be missing in action when the war ended. In the event of a recovered body or other confirmation of death then a diamond is engraved over the cross. If a named person who was considered 'missing in action' and therefore designated a cross were found to be alive, and returned, then a circle, 'symbol of life', would be engraved around the cross, however there have been no such cases (Murphy, 2007: 57).

The names are inscribed in chronological order of death and not by name, for a number of reasons. Maya Lin wanted the survivors and families to see their loved ones united, as they fought, on the Wall. Lin suggests that this would allow the veterans to move back in time and therefore a cathartic healing would occur for many by facing their loss again (Murphy, 2007). As I will show in later chapters, although Lin has not used the terms or may not even have understood them, she is alluding to both a 'teleogenic plot' narrative and continuing bonds theory of loss experience (by design) at the Wall, as this thesis will evidence. The chronological structure also supports the shape of the Wall. The first deaths in Vietnam occurred in 1955 with official observers being killed, and the last days of the South Vietnamese Government (post U.S. withdrawal) saw the final deaths of U.S. servicemen again acting as advisors. Thus, the height of U.S. involvement in the conflict, and therefore the highest casualties, directly corresponds to the apex of the Wall and the smallest numbers are found at the edges of the two wings. Walking the Wall then is to follow a narrative of the war written in the names of the dead.

⁷ Duery Felton confirmatory e-mail to author, May 2011.

There are also three half size 'Walls' and one three quarter sized Wall, based upon Lin's original (and singular) design, which travel across America and are booked by various cities and towns for remembrance services. The largest of these has travelled abroad including a visit to the U.K. (Murphy, 2007: 77). The success of the Wall(s) and its role in the national U.S. consciousness owes much to the originality and power of its design.

Maya Ying Lin is a woman of Asian descent who might well be described as the most unlikely of architects. In 1981, when she submitted the (blind process) design authorised by the U.S. senate and conducted by the Vietnam memorial fund she was a 21 year old architecture student at Yale university. Lin had very clear ideas on what she wanted the monument to represent:

'I had designed the memorial for a seminar on funeral architecture... We had been questioning what a war memorial is, its purpose, its responsibility... I felt a memorial should be honest about the reality of war and for the people who gave their lives... I didn't want a static object that people would just look at, but something they could relate to, as on a journey, or passage, that would bring each to their own conclusions... I had an impulse to cut open the earth...an initial violence that in time would heal...it were as if the black-brown earth were polished and made into an interface between the sunny world and the quite dark world beyond, that we can't enter...the names would become the memorial. There was no need to embellish' (Lopes, 1987: 16).

Lin was working to design criteria which were very strict, stipulating that the design should: (1) be reflective and contemplative in character; (2) harmonize with its surroundings; (3) contain the names of those who died in the conflict or who were still missing and (4) make no political statement about the war (Scruggs & Swerdlow, 1992: 65). This was extremely ambitious; nonetheless, Lin both met and adhered to it.

Despite this rigorous design control, opinions over the design, just as over the war, were divided. During the memorial's planning stages in 1981, the political and ascetic fighting threatened to kill off the entire project. The saving grace was Jan Scruggs (whose original concept the Wall was), who raised enough public funding to make the memorial possible and thus deflect some of the political interference (Scruggs & Swerdlow, 1992). He would raise \$7 million from unions, veterans' organisations, corporations and ordinary men, women and children from across America (Lopes, 1987).

Tom Carhart, a veteran who had also entered the design competition, called Lin's design a 'black gash of shame', a phrase that was to become the rallying cry of those opposed to Lin's concept (Schulzinger, 2006). However, the New York Times reporter Paul Goldbeger wrote:

'It is a subtle design, like every great memorial capable of being given different meanings by all of us. The anguish of the Vietnam War is present here but not in a way that does any dishonour to the veterans ...this memorial... honours the veterans who served in Vietnam with more poignancy, surely, than any other monument ever could' (Lopes, 1987: 17).

Lin specifically designed the Wall with this concept of flexibility in mind:

'It is up to each individual to resolve or to come to terms with their loss. For death is in the end a personal and private matter and the area containing this within the memorial is a quiet place, meant for personal reflection and private reckoning' (Lin, cited in Hass, 1998: 20).

Michael Norman took a reflective and insightful view, writing that *'the memorial is a collecting altar upon which the living leave tokens of the dead and trappings for an afterlife'* (Lopes, 1987: 18). Although this study will argue that what happens at the Wall is much more complex than Norman's view suggests, nonetheless, the range and diversity of the items left there gives some credence to his thoughts. On my last research visit,⁸ I saw several cans of beer, a small bag of toffees, several photographs, a single red rose, a joint, pop tarts, a Bible, a Vietnam War badge, a totem of a deer, an airplane ticket and a Senior Rates white naval cap left at the Wall, along with several letters:

*'I took the walk past this monument of black stone looking for you today.
I just wanted to come here and to tell you I miss you man.
I'm so sorry Tony – I know we left you - I hope you didn't suffer much –
see you soon'* (Anon).

Complementing this is a note I extracted from the MARS collection, which reads:

The Giving
I have seen the names of those I know, and yes, I have cried. My problem is I don't know the names I have tried to help only to have them die in my arms. In my sleep I hear their cries and see their faces...
Attached to this letter are my service medals. These belong to you and your family and your friends. I don't need them to show I was there. I have your faces in my sleep...
Tell me your names.
Love, your brother,
Glen 68-69

⁸ January-February, 2010.

Gifts at the Wall

On any given day⁹ visitors deposit objects along the black granite base of the Wall. Much like the names on the Wall, these 'offerings' have become part of the phenomenon of the memorial. In early 1982, as the Wall was in early stages of development, a naval Commander approached the builders and asked to put his brother's 'Purple Heart' medal into the concrete base of the Wall. The brother had died in Vietnam and, as with all casualties in action, was awarded this heart-shaped medal. The Commander then executed a salute, about turned, and left without another word. The Wall from this point onwards has been said by many people to 'have a heart' (Murphy, 2007: 129).

This action set a precedent, which was quickly followed by others. Initially mostly letters were left at the Wall, but this rapidly changed so that items of military clothing, boots, hats, webbing and flags became common. Soon items such as drugs, Vietnam era weapons, bottles of alcohol, wedding rings, toys and regimental orders would all turn up (Hass, 1998). These items would all be collected and, because of the unique nature of the objects deposited, were sent to the MARS federal depository for storage. No item is ever removed from storage and only perishable or illegal items are not retained. The collection is so large and nationally important now, consisting of over 150,000 items, that the Smithsonian has a permanent exhibition within its 'Vietnam War' collection. Various objects from the collection have been loaned to other museums (including the Imperial War Museum in London) and have also toured the United States.¹⁰

Jan Scruggs, The Vietnam veteran who was the driving force behind the building of the Wall, suggests that no one foresaw this happening. He and the other veterans wanted a

⁹ Witnessed by author during research trips to the Wall in 2009 and 2010, but also confirmed by the U.S. National Park Service and the Federal MARS centre in e-mails. The entire collection of objects deposited is available for researchers to view by appointment at the MARS centre in Landover, Maryland.

¹⁰ Discussions with, and confirmatory e-mails held by author, with Duery Felton (Curator, MARS) and the Staff at the IWM London.

place where they could be respected and remembered, free of political controversy and, above all, a place where the United States could, as a nation, begin to heal. The depositing of items – that spoke of love, betrayal, hurt, trauma but above all death, loss and unresolved pain – was not anticipated (Scruggs & Swerdlow, 1992).

Pam West,¹¹ Director of the MARS federal repository, is responsible for the collection, preservation and recording of items from over forty-four different sites in the United States, including Civil War battlefields (Murphy, 2007). The collection is unlike any other formal museum collection. Instead it is a dynamic compendium of deposits. Specifically, it was the individuals who deposited the objects at the Wall who determined their significance and hold the evidence of what that significance was. West and Felton,¹² among others, soon realised that they were witnessing an important phenomenon. Thus, under West's direction, in 1996, the objects became protected items and were accorded the designation 'Vietnam Veterans Memorial Collection'.¹³

With the collection having gained formal recognition, the Park Rangers at the Wall were trained in collection techniques. The items are initially stored in Washington and then transferred to the MARS repository, on Wednesday mornings, for classification, cleaning, preservation and storage. This process normally takes three days, but during busy periods, it can extend for up to a week. MARS itself is a state of the art, climate controlled and very high tech facility that is not open to members of the general public, but may be accessed by researchers by prior agreement and appointment. The importance of the items to the individuals makes the collection unique and key to this are the personal narratives and stories attached. Felton said to me, during a recent visit to the Wall, that the first Purple Heart that was set into the concrete base conveyed an important narrative that was particularly significant. Yet the one thousand other Purple Heart medals now in the collection, each with their own stories attached, which we will

¹¹ Interviewed at the MARS Centre, February 2009, when she was still director.

¹² Duery Felton is curator of the 'Wall' collection at MARS.

¹³ Discussions with West and Felton February 2009 & 2010, but also see Hass (1998) and Murphy (2007).

most likely never know, also have their own equally valid significance to the people who have left them.¹⁴

Over the years, the nature of the items left at the Wall has evolved and changed. Felton states in Murphy (2007: 133) *'we think that word was getting round that we were collecting and preserving these items for perpetuity. People started to leave items (sealed) in plastic bags or laminated. Items were getting larger and more sophisticated'*.

Many items are linked to the 'Missing in Action' and 'Prisoner of War' movements in America (MIA/POW). One of the more unique items was a Harley Davidson motorbike left at the Wall by a group of veterans. The motorbike has a unique paint job that marked it out as being dedicated to those who were 'Missing in Action'. The bike was not to be ridden until the last missing man in Vietnam was returned home. The bike will now never be ridden. Another significant item was a large wooden 'storm door', one side of which depicts an open Vietnam War scene and the other is homage to the missing in action and the prisoners of war. The door was used as a canvas, so the MARS staff took a lot of care to preserve it.

Among the most common items left at the Wall are still letters and notes. Many of the earliest letters were spontaneous and scribbled on hotel notepaper or paper bags (Sofarelli, 2006). Later letters contained poems, some of which were deeply conflicted and covered a confused set of time zones, reflecting the writer's personal journey covering many different years. Very often people still arrive and feel compelled to leave their thoughts and a record of their emotions behind. In an age of increasing internet activity there is also a section on the 'Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall' webpage, where people can post messages.¹⁵

¹⁴ Personal discussion with author, February 2010.

¹⁵ The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall page found at <http://thewall-usa.com/>, sighted 6th January 2011.

The MARS archive team feel that they have set the standard for modern documentary collections, 'We are the flagship for guiding the efforts for other memorials' said Felton. MARS has provided technical guidance for the collection and curator staff for the memorial collections for Oklahoma City, Columbine, Flight 93, 9/11, and from an international perspective, the Madrid Train Bombing. Although much has been published on all of these collections and the Wall to date, there is a general acceptance from authors, such as Palmer (1988), Sturken (1997, 2007) and Hass (1998) that the role of the Wall and the objects deposited there are significant in grieving and loss. However, there has been no attempt to understand or interrogate the objects collected (and the role of the Wall) as items, or fulcrums, in that grieving and loss.

The significance of this collection may be attested by the fact that the Federal Government have given permission for the development of a 'Vietnam Memorial Visitors and Research Centre', to be housed below the Lincoln memorial at an estimated cost of \$90 million. The central section of which will hold a rotating display of items from the collection (Murphy, 2007: 137). Despite this accepted importance, the collection is intrinsically linked to the Wall. It is dependent upon the U.S. public's relationship to the Wall and would not exist independently from it. It is a subject of the Wall and any exploration of loss must include the Wall and the objects as a single event.

The Wall, the War and the Veterans

The controversial nature of the war with its associated unpopularity and the reality that the fissure it fashioned in the returning troops and in American society with its Government, created an enormous sense of national, corporate and personal loss of identity. The 'manifest destiny' that so many Americans held dear was lost, perhaps forever (Schulzinger, 2006). The reasons for fighting, killing and dying in this war were not only unclear, but were for many obscene. Worse, the military's lack of a formal

decoration of war meant that fighting units rotated their people in and out of the fighting, returning them home without unit, corporate or national acknowledgement and welcome (Appy, 2008; Schulzinger, 2006).

By 1969, support for the war and veterans was almost non-existent (Scott, 2004) and veterans came home to changing ideas about patriotism, heroism and a society driven by the civil rights movement, Watergate and political assassination of significant liberal figures. There was no clear ideology around which community and personal narratives of grief and loss could form. It was a dirty, lost war, wanting to be forgotten before it was even over (Hass, 1998). People lost sons, lovers, husbands, wives, and often their own self-respect and identity, and their tragedy was compounded by the lack of a public acceptance (or even opportunity) for expressing grief, loss or pride. The ability to bond, or to continue one's bonds, with those who had been lost (including the self), was severely damaged and needed to find an expression and place. I will argue that this expression found its fulfilment at the Wall.

Hass (1998), among other authors, suggests that the Wall evokes a physical response. It promotes emotional reactions; grief, loss, rage, despair, resolution, from those who visit it. Because of the public nature of the Wall and its construction, the users are emotionally crossing a boundary between the public and the private with both the individual citizens and the nation claiming the memorial as their own. The Wall users are, in a very real sense, owners of a shared space and this is enormously empowering. It promotes the ability to contribute a personal representation (or a narrative) in the form of a deposited object. This is all the more important, as we will see later in the research, because of the difficulties in representing a personal response to the conflict. The heart breaking years of perceived repression of the war and its costs, the social provision and acceptance of the veterans and their families and society generally have all contributed to an implied inability to grieve and bond 'naturally' (Maraniss, 2004).

Glen, whose letter was used as an example earlier, gave his medals for the nameless men who died in his arms – as a bridge between him and them. His medals form a connection, or bond, to those he could not find on the Wall. For Glen, leaving his medals (symbols of his war) at the Wall is both a timeless moment of continuing bonds (Klass *et al*, 1996) and re-bonding activity (Unruh, 1983). The Wall, and the depositing of the medals there, is evidence of Glen’s simultaneous reconnection and release.

If the Wall is truly open to all, it might also have negative connotations and effects. I found a very small, but significant repository of what might be described as ‘anti-Wall’ or anti-American material left there whilst researching at MARS. The following letter is important as an example of ‘continuing bonds’ with the dead from the conflict, but also of the devastating negative political and social responses to those who served, which, in turn, also finds expression at the Wall.

‘The Wall’

I miss my friends whose names are here

The times we shared, the laughs and fear

I’m still surprised my name isn’t here!

There’s Cobb whose date they’ve got wrong

Whisky and Logan who died near Tri Bong

“We got to get out of this place”, our favourite song.

After 18 years I still can’t forget what we did,

What we saw

We fought for our country, but our country screwed us all

I am sorry my names not on “the Wall”

Huey 68-69’

(Palmer, 1988: 83)

Huey would rather have been in an honoured place with the fallen than struggling within a society that does not seem to care or honour his service. His understanding of who he is and what he has become is fixed in the war years and he has not been able to progress from it. Huey's loss of understanding of himself is every bit as real as the loss of life found, and honoured, at the Wall. His letter is a bond to both a lost time and people as well as to who he was, is, and might have been.

The following anonymous letter that I found in the MARS collection is even darker, but maintains the same social commentary and sense of betrayal and loss:

*I didn't want a monument,
Not even one as sober as that
Vast black wall of broken lives.
I didn't want a postage stamp.
I didn't want a road beside the Delaware
River with a sign proclaiming:
Vietnam Memorial Veterans Highway.*

*What I wanted was a simple recognition
Of the limits of our power as a nation
To inflict our will on others.
What I wanted was an understanding
That the world is neither black – and – white
Nor ours.*

*What I wanted
Was an end to monuments.*

(Anon).

The Wall is a complex and multidimensional memorial that has an important part in American culture and life, which has to be understood within its political context and the changes in U.S. society that took place from the sixties to the present day (Schulzinger, 2006; Savage, 2009). Commentators have written on the changing role of the Wall, arguing that it now manages to hold those who were politically diametrically opposed in what was one of the most troubled periods of U.S. history (Scott, 2004; Jeffreys-Jones, 1999). As a result, American society has reached a point where both soldiers and pacifists stand together at the Wall on Memorial Day, alongside those who have no relationship at all to the Vietnam era. The Memorial is known throughout the United States as 'The Healing Wall', the healing, I will seek to argue, being directly connected to the objects left there.

The objects are 'fulcrums' for resolution and change in terms of loss and closure, both in relation to American political history and the personal experience of the visitors. Many of the objects left at the Wall make political or social comments. In this regard, the Wall has become a political soapbox. The Wall's location within Washington's political Mall holds an almost 'Sacred' position to many Americans (Savage, 2009). This, coupled with the Mall's use for concerts, parades, marches, protests and political statements makes it a powerful site for potential manipulation, as well as a safe repository for those who need to either publicly, or privately make difficult statements, or just tell their stories.

This aspect of the objects as functions, or fulcrums, in bereavement rather than 'mementoes' or 'linking objects', has not been addressed previously. Hallam and Hockey (2001) in their work on death, memory and the object do not address bereavement theory nor is the subject identified as a significant part of memorialisation. Rather, they focus on grief and memory, in relation to culturally and personally significant objects. Hass (1988), in her significant work on the objects left at the Wall, concentrates entirely on memory and loss from an anthropological position. Her

comprehensive bibliography does not reference a single specific text on bereavement or grief.

Gifts and Bereavement at the Wall

The war challenged what it meant to be American and the objects left at the Wall both answer and ask the same questions, repeatedly, often never finding a clear resolution but sometimes offering a sense of peace, or at least acceptance (Murphy, 2007). The objects let researchers listen to, or witness, some of this outpouring of personal stories: stories of death and betrayal, bereavement and uncertainty, personal and national identity, all of them, to some degree, stories of loss.

The objects demonstrate a new concept in the marking of American identity and of mediating death and loss. The abiding need of so many Americans compelled to visit the Wall is, I will suggest, inextricably linked to their search for an answer to the question, 'why?'. However, perhaps it is also tied to their desire to recover a sense of identity. Like Lopes, or the mother who visits her son at the Wall, they come to re-bond (Klass *et al*, 1996). Hass also identifies an essential question at the heart of the Wall, but she suggests that, *'I see the gifts Americans bring to the Wall as part of a continuing public negotiation about patriotism and nationalism. These gifts forge a new mode of public commemoration that suggests ordinary Americans deeply crave a memory, or a thousand memories together, that speaks to ways in which the war disrupted their sense of American culture and their place in it'* (Hass, 1998: 3). I would agree with what Hass asserts but in concentrating on memory and memorialisation in this process, she fails to address the real sense of loss, shame and bereavement that America felt during this period, which continues today. In my view, this is a major shortcoming of her work. What this study will suggest is that rather than the 'forging of a new mode of public commemoration', it is the forging of an emotional bridge, or bond, to both the dead and

a sense of contested social loss, that is happening here. The objects form a part of that bridge.

'Memorials don't necessarily remember anything; they invent something. They produce from the chaotic multiple events of the past. They exist to produce digestible meaning... The Wall doesn't go that far... It's left open, which might be one reason why people are so engaged with it. Its reflective quality means that people can go back. You use what the memorial gives you to make meaning.' (Hass cited in Murphy, 2007: 152)

This research will argue that the objects, using a continuing bonding process, are doing just that (Unruh, 1983). This proposal receives further support from Spencer Crew who works for the Smithsonian:

'The construction of an identity for the veterans since their return from the war has become the most present and continuing narrative of the memorial' (Sturken cited in Murphy, 2007: 155).

Sturken (2007) suggests that the central theme of the Wall's narrative is the way that it represents veterans who had been invisible and without a voice before its construction and the subsequent interest in discussing the war. These narratives and stories help society to grasp and synthesise painful, traumatic and painful events. John Baky, in discussing the role of the Wall, added:

'With a lot of traumatic historical events, people have a great need to "re-remember" in ways that allow them to be comfortable. If they have to live with the reality of certain events, it becomes almost too much, and they reject it outright and [instead] we try to remember it in a way that we can digest it. The Wall reinvents itself, and it reinvents people who are

trying to remember. The intensity of the desire to remember or re-remember the Vietnam War is almost without end' (Murphy, 2007: 155).

Significantly, these statements yield two conclusions. First, it is not just the veterans, or even their families, who alone suffered significant loss and even death in the Vietnam War period. Four million people visit the Wall each year, but only 2.59 million people served through the entire war period, in theatre (Murphy, 2007: 10). The whole of the United States suffered through this period of national crisis of identity with mass desertions, imprisonments and groups fleeing to Canada to avoid the draft, not to mention the Kent State university students murdered by National Guardsman during a campus anti-war protest (Maranis, 2004). Actress Helen Hayes said to Scruggs (1992) that after the Wall had been opened and become so loved by the American nation, that she had felt a great burden lift from her own shoulders. That sense of relief was felt across America.

Second, this study argues that the real significance of the emotions and experiences expressed at the Wall by all the users is one of loss. The trauma, pain, anger, grief and transformation of America during this period and beyond, are all significant in that they find expression at the Wall and through the objects deposited there. However, this research asserts that they all have their roots in a significant, but varied, loss and coping mechanism founded in a re-bonding process. On this, Senator Bob Kerry said:

'The Wall allowed people to understand loss, to value it, face it and grieve it, which is the hardest thing for human beings to do' (Murphy, 2007: 157).

Hass (1998) suggests that no other memorial has been built to have the same accessibility in design as the Wall. She argues that the Wall does not come to any consensus and is politically and socially neutral. It does, however, celebrate the soldiers

and, she argues, that is its strength and the reason why the Wall heals division so well. Hass develops her argument to suggest that this healing is linked to both the Wall and the objects left there. She proposes that the absence of a clearly stated U.S. Government position on the conflict and the design of the Wall prompted people to respond to the memorial with their own interpretations. This, combined with the individual names, marked with both corporate identity and singular individual narrative and the Wall's ability to reflect images, evolving funerary practices and shifting cultural values, all contributed to the phenomenon of offering objects at the Wall. She further suggests that leaving something at the Wall is an act of negotiating each of the loss relationships between the dead and the nation, the dead and the past, the dead and the living – in the face of a changing social and political landscape.

Baky (Murphy, 2007) adds the proposal that the depositing of objects at the Wall is an invitation to culture (his word) to participate in grieving. In addition to the personal grief and tears of the depositor, he suggests that the objects serve as a tangible sign that we (society and the individual grievers) have connected to the Wall and to each other in the grieving and healing process. This may be, he suggests, because the United States has become a much more open and engaged society built now on full disclosure. Death is now shared and no longer a private, hidden event.¹⁶ Spectators are now asked to share pain, *'The personal artefacts that have been left at the memorial – photographs, letters, teddy bears, MIA/POW bracelets, clothes, medals of honour – are offered up as a testimony, transposed from personal to cultural artefacts, to bear witness to pain suffered'* (Sturken, 1997: 14).

Baky, supporting Sturken's supposition, suggests that this phenomenon has not happened by accident. He proposes that, as the Wall was created by the veterans themselves and paid for by the public, there is in a real sense a 'public ownership' of the

¹⁶ Also see Walter (1994)

memorial and that it would have been impossible to leave a 'teddy bear' at a monument owned and run by the government.

Objects and Gifting in bereavement

This process has its reflections in other cultural reactions to grief. If a child is murdered in the U.S. or the U.K., teddy bears, flowers, cards, football shirts and other objects are soon deposited at the scene of the incident. London has many 'ghost bikes'; where a cyclist has recently died an all white bike may be chained to a railing and become an impromptu shrine to the lost.¹⁷ Roadside shrines now proliferate in both countries. When the Oklahoma bombing happened, a chain fence was placed across the site and people began to push cards, toys, medals, T-shirts, key chains and American flags into it (Sturken, 2007).

Our reaction to celebrity death has also changed. The outpouring of items left on the roadside after the death of Princess Diana stretched for miles (Walter, 1999). In contrast, after John Lennon's death (two years before the Wall was built) there were groups of people who congregated, held candles and sang, but there were no items left on the pathway where he was shot (Murphy, 2007). If the same thing happened today, that would almost certainly not be the case. My own group of undergraduates, studying death and bereavement, were astounded that there was a time when objects would not be left.¹⁸

The ritual of leaving objects to show support for strangers or as 'linking objects' to the dead (Vulcan, 1981) or the significant loss, has become commonplace. Virtually every

¹⁷ See <http://ghostbikes.org/london>, sighted 6th January 2011.

¹⁸ UWIC Class discussion 6th December 2010 (Death of the body, loss and bereavement – 3rd year undergraduates).

memorial service, ceremony or effort following particular traumatic circumstances, has had to address the topic of what to do with the items left behind.

Each situation is different and there can be, of course, contradictory significance for differing collections. MARS do not collect items left at the Korean War memorial or that for World War II on the Mall. There are very few such objects left there, but their significance is not considered as equal to that of the Wall.¹⁹ Uniquely, the collection of items at the Wall still continues to grow by hundreds of items a month and the collection is not 'end-dated'. Its national significance is considered so great that the MARS team caring for it have become a part of the new development and resource visitors centre for the Wall to be built below the Lincoln memorial (Murphy, 2007).

The unasked question here is, why? Why do so many Americans and foreigners visit the Wall and deposit objects there and why does the American Federal Government give such credence to it? If, as seems likely, gifting has to do with the experience of loss or grief, then what is its significance for bereaved people? Is gifting, as Sturken suggests a screen for memory projection or as Hass promotes an anthropomorphic and political action, or is it simply an emotional projection as Baky assumes?

This research acknowledges that all of these authors accept that the actions of depositing items at the Wall have deep personal and societal importance. They all also acknowledge that a profound bereavement, grief and loss process is at work here, but none of them have explained, or even explored what happens at the Wall from that assumption. Sturken, Hass and all the other significant 'Wall' authors quoted do not reference a single bereavement paper or model in their research relating to the Wall.

¹⁹ Discussion between Pam West and author, January 2009.

Approaches to understanding bereavement

There are no existing models of bereavement that can fully explain the gifting that takes place at the Wall. However there are now standard models of bereavement that help to interrogate the function and process of loss, in general terms. These are important to the study as they have become touchstones in our attempt to understand loss.

The classic model is often taken to be that of Kubler-Ross and Kessler (2005). They present ideas that support a death model, rather than bereavement. From a sociological standpoint, their model may be useful in interpreting cultural and establishment loss and maladjustment, particularly from a U.S. perspective.

Parkes (1998, 2009) provides a stream of opportunities for comparison and contrast and his psycho social transition (PST) model is particularly useful in broadening an understanding of the process of 'gifting' at the Wall. Similarly, a model developed by Worden (2009) has very set 'phases' or 'transitional functions', which may be informative in relation to the more traumatic memories of bereavement and loss seen at the Wall. Whilst compatible, none of these models relay, with any degree of precision, what takes place at the Wall. However, they remain both informative and relevant to my research.

More pertinent, because of its flexibility, is Valentine's (2008) use of narrative to further illuminate 'Continuing Bonds theory,' as developed from the work of Klass *et al* (1996), Walter (1994, 1996) and Goss & Klass (2005). It provides a perspective that moves away from prescriptive models to an emphasis on diversity of experience and individuality in expression. Valentine's work has been central to the thesis. Whereas it might be expected that the thesis could develop a new model of bereavement through the study, stemming from Valentine, it will be argued that one related to this specific memorial and the objects left there is not actually needed or justified.

Whilst the 'Wall' itself is an object, it is in the material nature of the singular objects deposited there that bereavement and loss find clearest representation. Pearce, Hallam and Hockey, all recognised experts in the field of material culture studies, recognise the role of objects as a focus of memory for a loved one, although from differing perspectives. Pearce (1994) argues for a very broad understanding of the object which, at times, almost implies that objects have an identity beyond the physical. Hallam and Hockey's work (2001) is based upon a comprehensive understanding of death and material culture. However, in both cases, the authors take a perspective that is grounded in memory, rather than in bereavement or loss theory, as do the American authors who have explored the Wall and the objects left there.

I would argue that Kavanagh (2000) stands in contrast to the other authors, particularly Pearce (1994), in offering a much more functional and complete understanding of the objects, in that they have no personality, life or story except that which we foster onto them from our own emotional and cultural needs. This perspective is central to my argument. No author has identified the objects deposited as essentially part of a complex and cultural grieving and loss process. I argue that there is clear evidence, not least from the known stories attached to, and understanding of, the functions of the objects themselves, that suggest that this is indeed the case.

In a broader context, Volkan (1981), in his seminal work on complicated grieving and the object, addresses loss from the perspective of objects as links between the dead and the living in both positive and negative terms. For Volkan, 'linking' or 'transitional' objects have an almost magical relationship to the user, in that the objects are transmissions of healing and remembrance as well as potential blocks to progressive healing from loss (Volkan 1981: 335-374). I argue that none of these concepts, arguably focused on memory, find common ground in relation to the gifting of specific objects or personal interaction at the Wall.

Parkes (1998) would claim that appropriate counselling can mitigate many of the problems associated with traumatic and sudden loss and a sound knowledge of the inherent risks involved.²⁰ Whilst this may be the case, in his various works, Parkes fails to address two immediate issues with regard to what is happening at the Wall. First, Stanley Stylianos and Mary Vachon (2006: 397-410) researching the role of support in bereavement,²¹ identified the importance of friendship circles over that of established counselling services, in early stage bereavement. Such networks are likely to be an important factor for returning troops and their families in a society undergoing radical change and can provide much longer term support structure for adaptation to radical change. Second, Parkes (1989, 2006) himself has identified the diversity of the functions that influence what he would define as 'recovery'. Thus, there is no single construct that can adequately address the complex process of grief and loss expressed at the Wall.

What Parkes is suggesting is a significant, but only partial explanation. Clearly then, experiences of sudden, prolonged or extreme loss can best find support from a range of sources suited to individual needs and I would argue that this is precisely what takes place at the Wall.

²⁰ Also see Stroebe et al (2006: 98)

²¹ Stroebe et al (2006: 397-410) (but see 403 in particular)

CHAPTER TWO

The Thesis

This thesis will examine the purpose and function of the Washington Vietnam War Memorial (The Wall) in relation to the offerings left at that site. It will seek to interpret these objects in terms of visual bereavement stories (rather than just narratives), utilising examples of object, space and place. The main goal is to explore in what sense this ritual of 'gifting' represents a (politically) managed bereavement process and how this is worked out in terms of the nature of the gifted artefacts.

This research began by suggesting an exploration of how the actions at the Wall function as personal and national expressions of grief and loss, and an investigation into the possibility of an associated role of pilgrimage to accompany the gift. The process of laying memorial gifts was to be explored to ascertain if what is happening at the Wall is truly unique, in a contemporary sense, or whether links could be shown with roadside memorials, the death of the Princess of Wales or the graves of children. Finally, the research set out to question whether bereavement ritual is changing in light of a dominant material culture established at the Wall and, if so, why? However, this thesis quickly evolved and evidenced a more sophisticated set of questions which resulted in the following four specific objectives:

- the identification of the specific roles assigned to 'gifting' within bereavement theory;
- the investigation of the role that the social/political context of loss plays in gifting;
- critical evaluation of the ways that the gifts are expressive of a narrative of grief and loss;

- review of current models of bereavement with specific reference to the Vietnam War Memorial.

There are no existing models of bereavement that describe, or explain, the experience at the Wall. Indeed, no author to date has identified the depositing of objects forming a part of a complex and cultural grieving process. It is beyond the scope of this research to establish an entirely new model of bereavement, nor, I would argue, is one needed given the adaptability and flexibility of existing sociological understandings. Rather, this study will contribute a contextualised understanding of bereavement by employing and illuminating the experience of national and individual grief within the unique context of the Vietnam memorial and the objects left there. The Memorial is known throughout the United States as 'The Healing Wall'. I will argue that the 'healing' to which this refers is directly related to the objects left, or gifted, at the monument becoming 'fulcrums' for resolution and change in terms of loss, closure and continuing bonds; both in terms of American political history and the personal experience of the visitors. The value of an account that articulates the role played by the gifting of objects in grieving is that there is currently little understanding of this relationship and no research in a Western context that has explored contemporary bereavement experience and practice in this regard.

Research Methods

This research will:

- Draw on structured approaches stemming from a phenomenological trajectory; including spatial and contextual observation, the investigation of different uses of space, location and material along with close attention to, and observation of, socially and culturally specific information.

- Explore the structure of observed behaviour and recording of material and spatial phenomenon within theoretical contexts that draw on ideas of bereavement and social use of material in 'life shape' and in relation to rituals.
- Conduct a critical literature review.
- Establish a holistic, ethnographic study centred on a direct, first-hand observation of ritualistic grieving behaviour, to include participant observation, with specific regard to the experience of bereavement and loss in associated cultural practices and narratives at the Vietnam Veterans Monument.

In the early stages of this research, I conducted two research trips to Washington DC over two years, during the winter months of January and February, to visit the Wall and stand vigil there over a number of days and one night, recording my observations. I made appointments to visit the Vietnam veteran's collection from the Wall at the Smithsonian and requested, and was granted, research space and resources at the MARS federal repository, where the objects from the Wall are preserved and stored for the American Nation. I used the time in Washington to visit the Congressional Library and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, National Post Traumatic Research Centre Washington D.C. After a period of working with the repository staff at MARS and meeting other significant National Park personnel associated with the running of the Wall, I quickly found myself engaged in a lively dialogue with political and academic authors, VA medical staff and therapists, as well as members of veterans associations, all keen to explore aspects of this research. This was significant for a number of reasons.

Until that point, I had not recognised that the Wall had such a large, dedicated and powerful community built around it. Nor did I appreciate how politically important the Wall and its associated community had become. I was unaware how large the hurt, damaged and, to some degree, largely 'unrecovered' post-Vietnam War conflicted population still is. The Wall is used as much today as it was in 1982 when it was

unveiled, marked by an increased diversity in the people, use and objects found there (Murphy, 2007).

I was completely surprised at the total unanimity of the veteran community and all the other Wall user groups that I encountered, in their assessment that the adoption of the Wall (or not) by American society and the nation was an expression of loss and found a form in the depositing of objects at the Wall. This adoption was, however, evidently a very conflicted relationship, subject to political manipulation or influence. This relationship between loss, the Wall, and the politics of power was not static and was constantly changing and evolving, as was the use of the Wall by differing groups. Even a short time at the Wall served to confirm the flexible use and dynamic there and this presented a serious problem in making this research manageable.

For the sake of consistency, this study is limited mainly to those who had been either involved in the Vietnam War, those who had been bereaved or suffered significant loss in relation to the conflict, or those who had been closely involved in the politics of that era. I further defined my research to include only those who have a relationship to the Wall and the objects left there.

Negotiating a research method in a conflicted political space with the implications and challenges of taking an interactive approach to engaging with individuals, culturally specific bereavement sites, and material collections of national importance, in terms of identity, grief and loss proved both complex and difficult. Crucially, adopting and maintaining a research journal enabled a reflective review habit; it also provided a grounded data collection tool (Rodgers, 2002) very early in the research. In so doing, it became invaluable in promoting engagement with the subject without self-projection and helping to maintain boundaries and a sense of perspective in an emotionally charged arena.

The Vietnam War left a national sea of uncertainties, disillusionment, pain, grief and loss and a very deep well of anger (Schulzinger, 2006; Scott, 2004; Murphy, 2007). From the beginning this thesis would have to be centred within that pain and sense of loss but also be 'apart' from it. My own history as an ex-serviceman of some twenty years, covering three separate wars, was a considerable help in that it fostered access to research units and Wall managers (most of whom were veterans and we therefore spoke a common 'service' language). However, it also presented a potential impediment in that it might colour my attitudes, reactions, approach and potentially impose an inappropriate set of values on my research.

For example, every time I have visited the Wall on a research trip, I have felt compelled to leave something there. Often this was a simple rose, but on one occasion I left my old service cap. Whilst this was a mark of respect, it was significantly more than that. I felt an intense sense of guilt that I was using the dead men and women for my research; profiting, in effect, from their sacrifice. The cap was, upon reflection, a form of identification, or bond, with the dead; allowing me to feel that I could proceed from that shared position. The roses were a mark of respect for their loss and that of their families. Deeper than this, with both gifts I was also identifying with the profoundly held emotions and repercussions of the war and the impact on the American psyche. This was unconscious and stands completely outside my personal belief structure. Nonetheless, I felt compelled to take part in the ritual. I do not feel that this was necessarily a bad thing or inappropriate, but it was an emotional response and position that I needed to be aware of in my research. These considerations required the development of a comprehensive and culturally specific ethical protocol for this research, details of which are included later in this chapter.

From the inception of this study, there was an understanding and conception that both the objects deposited at the Wall, and the Wall itself, have had narratives fostered upon and applied to them (Kavanagh, 2000; Pearce, 1994). Narrative theory, fortunately, has

many forms and uses a variety of analytic practices. Creswell (2007) takes the approach that narrative analysis should permit the researcher to use paradigmatic reasons for a narrative study. I have followed this concept and it has allowed me to utilise specific therapeutic narrative frames of reference, such as Paley's (Gunaratnam & Oliviere, 2009) conception of 'teleogenic plot' in the understanding of how death and bereavement are expressed at the Wall in letters, the depositing of objects and occasionally in autobiography.

Plummer (1983) suggests that biographical and autobiographical study can be approached from a historical perspective, which includes single, and multiple episodes and experiences that may not be chronological and can include individual and community based experiences. These may include folklore and reflections, which are personal remembrances and expressions, rather than historical facts. This research approach can be directly linked to an understanding of teleogenic plot and finds expression in some of the significant personal narratives in this thesis, particularly those of Laurent and Coppell.

Whilst narrative study reports on the life of a single individual (even if we draw universalities from that study), phenomenological study describes the meaning of a phenomenon for groups of individuals through their shared, lived experience. It might explain, or describe, what all participants have in common or at least share (Creswell, 2007). A phenomenological perspective is used throughout this thesis and is particularly relevant in terms of understanding the experiences of 'loss' amongst the Vietnam veterans and their shared national experiences at the Wall. This perspective is combined with narrative analysis to explore both the shared and individual reactions and understandings of loss, incurred during and after the war years. It is particularly relevant in understanding the role of 'object depositing' as a ritual.

Working with very structured groups consisting of veterans, widows, tourists, curators, and politicians, it became very apparent that distinct but separate Wall user groups present problems in terms of understanding the loss or grief being expressed there. These groups displayed very different personal and corporate belief structures. However, with each group, there appeared to be a powerful, shared unity of understanding, which was also true of those who considered themselves individualistic and completely unaffiliated; but who, from this perspective, did form their own disparate community.

To address this significant group of communities established at the Wall in different ways, incorporating an entire cultural cluster, I found the use of an ethnographic approach both useful and justified. Typically focusing on larger groups, it permits the researcher to explore and interpret shared and learned patterns of behaviours, values, beliefs and language, allowing for a pluralistic approach (Creswell, 2007). It promotes questions about shared experiences, histories and understandings based in the past, but relevant to contemporary lives. As such, it enables understanding of the kinds of experiences (past and current) associated with the Wall and beyond in contemporary America, making it an invaluable method for this research.

Whilst all these approaches are useful in exploring why groups and individuals might use the Wall, none address the way that the Wall functions as a national, and perhaps 'totemic', structure. Research deploying spatial theory engages in a range of theories on the histories of geographical thought, focusing both on specific traditions of thought within contemporary human geography (including government, feminism and non-representational theories) and on the questions and problems addressed by power and control (Painter in Cok *et al*, 2007).

This form of research base might include concepts such as scale, territory, boundaries and a sustained engagement with the implications for spatial thought of the emergence of practice based ontology. It has particular relevance for 'life space', through work on affect, emotion, vision, embodiment, materiality and memory. Although not crisply designed or conceptualized, this approach to the study of buildings and space with regard to materiality, objects and our sense of who we are, has particular significance for the use of the Wall, the objects left there and the motivation for doing so. As such, it does not provide an explanation for the actions at the Wall, more a useful tool for exploring them.

When working through the possible users of, and uses for, the Wall, I have had to struggle with the role of the individual as both a singular experience and as part of a significant group, even if for many years they were unaware that they belonged to that group (Laurent, 1999). This was difficult, but I decided to link my chapters in pairs, exploring the general experiences of different user groups at the Wall in terms of the loss and grief expressed in the objects deposited there, but also as a singular example of that expression. Thus, to address how a cultural experience might be explored in a singular context and as a specific illustration, a 'case study' approach was employed for the second chapters in the three couplets to explore individual experiences within a specific context and setting. Although, arguably, not a methodology, it is an approach for inquiry within a comprehensive research strategy, and in this context, very useful for this research.

Ethical issues

Developing an ethical approach

The sensitive nature of much of this research has demanded an open and intensely reflective approach to ethical issues. The requirements found in most ethical guidelines,

such as guaranteeing anonymity and confidentiality, avoidance of harm and gaining informed consent, are more complex than can be satisfied by adherence to general concepts and the demands and requirements agreed for University Ethical Committees. The implied freedom to research that such documents provide can be used at the expense of addressing the more ongoing everyday ethical concerns (Marshall & Rossman, 2010). These concerns, particularly in regard to the very deeply held, but contested, views of some of the individuals who were engaged in helping develop this research, include situations that arise unexpectedly out of the interactive nature of qualitative research, and for which there may be no obvious immediate solution. Such situations call for a process of negotiation, compromise, adjustment and a very professional interpretation and reaction to circumstances and people based upon the basis of experience and sound ethical judgement.

Although standardized ethical guidelines provide a useful starting point and checklist, they can reinforce a tendency to separate ethics from the everyday research endeavour. To address this I have used the 'subject headings' from Kumar (2005) as recommended by my University Ethical Committee but flexibly adapted and tailored to this particular study.

In terms of obtaining free and informed consent, in relation to some of the phenomenological research at the Wall, there are limits to how adequately one can inform participants about all aspects of the research that this encompasses. For example, the use of notes or letters that have been stuffed into cracks in the Wall or interpretations about specific objects that might be related to narratives about violence, domestic abuse or suicide provoke difficult decisions (Mason, 2002). If I have found myself in doubt in such complex situations, I have followed the simple maxim of 'First do no harm'. Whilst this is hardly sophisticated, it has served as a useful and uniformly applicable tool. Nonetheless, this research did require an established protocol to act as a safeguard for those situations that could be predicted as potentially problematic.

Collecting information and seeking consent

All the narratives and stories gathered have been sourced from published materials or from direct observation of the objects at the MARS repository or at the Wall itself; individual interviews with grieving or bereaved subjects has not been sought or solicited. Beyond simple observation, complex personal grief narratives from secondary sources, which cannot be verified or the consent of the individuals concerned verified, have not be used. Furthermore, authors of open letters at the Wall are deemed to have given consent, whereas those leaving closed letters are not.

Other researchers and professionals in my research field have from time to time spoken about their own experiences with regard to the material collected and with reference to the war years and in such situations consent has been sought in writing before using their utterances within my own work. All information collected and used has been rigorously tested by both me and my supervisors to justify relevance. I have reserved the right to use information left at the Wall in photographic, written or other form, subject to the standards set by the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects (1993: 83).²²

Providing incentives and seeking sensitive information

No individual has been directly asked to participate in this work. Information that may be sensitive or confidential was not needed or sought. There has been no need to provide any incentives for participation in this study, nor will any be offered.

The possibility of causing harm to the participants and maintaining confidentiality

Whilst the data collection for this study has not posed risk to the participants in any way, I note that, in any disclosure, minimum risk implies that the extent of harm or discomfort caused to the research participants must not be greater than ordinarily encountered in daily life. It is thus recognized that sharing information about a

²² Formally a part of the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, now only used as guidelines and found in Kumar (2005).

respondent with others for purposes other than research is unethical and has not been entered into.

Ethical issues relating to the researcher

Avoiding bias and provision or deprivation of a treatment

Researcher bias is unethical, and whilst this is a given, subjectivity relates to my personal experience, educational, training, competence in research and philosophical perspective. Bias would be a deliberate attempt to hide or distort my findings, whereas subjectivity, in this context, would not. Both need careful consideration.

Using inappropriate research methodology and incorrect reporting

It is clearly inappropriate to use a highly biased sample, history or narrative within the context of this research. Given the nature of this thesis, this is a significant issue. The choice of two highly skilled and professional supervisors, their close supervision, as well as my own personal integrity, provide sufficient safeguard in this respect.

Inappropriate use of the information

The use of information in a way that directly or indirectly adversely affects respondents is unethical. My research will play a part in understanding how objects help individuals or societies in times of extreme stress and pain. There may be times when individuals have shared their thoughts with me, or I may have witnessed events when subjects become vulnerable. In these situations, I have not used the information or behaviour of the individual, or recorded the event. My research has focused on available published material, simple observation or interviews with fellow researchers who are not affected by personal trauma and who have given their prior consent.

Structure of Thesis

This research will be presented as a thesis structured in eleven chapters, each (broadly) between 6000-11000 words.

Chapters One & Two: The Wall, Grief and Gifting and Thesis

These first chapters focus on the nature and perceived role of the Wall, the objects left there and the context of its design and use. This pair of chapters presents the thesis background, research question, aims, objectives, methodology and anticipated contributions. They discuss ethical issues and set out the structure for the thesis. They explore the possible interpretations and set a template to manage both a highly complex and changing bereavement story, and contested political insights at this significant American memorial.

Chapter Three: Conceptual Frameworks

This chapter will explore the relationship between bereavement, loss, the politics of the post-Vietnam experience and the objects deposited at, and in relation to, the Wall. This will be achieved by applying some key concepts used by bereavement theorists to the action of 'depositing' – 'continuing bonds' (Klass *et al*, 1996), 'narrative' and 'psycho social transition' or PST (Parkes, 1998) – in order to further illuminate individual experiences at the Wall. Whilst compatible with the broader context of continuing bonds, PST provides a finer tool for discussing the traumatic sense of loss from the personal, cultural and political contexts evidenced at the Wall. Key to this exploration will be the role of both the objects deposited and the broader context of material culture in general. This chapter will provide a review of literature but from a devolved position, in which bereavement theories and arguments are presented as the basis for understanding how different groups, influenced by different social, cultural and political settings, have responded to the memorial.

The next six chapters form the foundation for my argument. They are presented as couplets to explore the use made of the Wall by three separate and specific groups. The Wall has been in existence since 1982 and, inevitably, the way that it is used has developed and changed considerably over time. Any exploration of the Wall and the objects deposited there would have to take account of this changing (and to some groups – static) function. The simplest and most effective way to do this is to group the users into three distinct categories. The first will focus on the ‘bereaved’ that use the Wall and, in particular, the widows of servicemen who did not return. The second will explore the experience of the returning veterans, many of whom are bereaved and suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Many of those users have also experienced a crisis of self-worth and a loss of identity, which finds expression at the Wall. The third section will look at other user groups, including ‘hurt’ groups who may not have been directly involved in the conflict, particularly in relation to the political use, and perhaps abuse, of the Wall.

The first chapter in all the couplets will form, argue and present the background for continuing bond theory in each of the differing groups’ uses of the Wall and the objects left there. The second chapter in each couplet will present a specific case study based upon a significant narrative and object (including letters) with a relationship to the Wall, to serve as an exemplar to the first, based upon a specific individual’s encounter.

Couplet One: Widows

Chapter four: Widows at the Wall

For many Americans, the Wall has become a place of healing and hallowed ground. The memorial draws millions of visitors each year. These visitors have left over 150,000 objects (gifts), which have now been catalogued and stored by the Smithsonian and the Federal Archive. Many of these items, where their history is known, are left by veterans, families or friends; very few of the objects are left by the widows of servicemen. The

objects associated with this comparatively small, but arguably significant group, are letters, poems and notes written by those who have deposited them. In this chapter, the thesis will explore how these letters have become part of a narrative that allows the widows to explore and renegotiate their continuing relationship with their dead husbands, rather than finding 'closure' or 'internalisation' of their grief. It will analyse these letters to explore how that relationship finds specific expression at the Wall, the findings of which will be built upon in subsequent chapters.

Chapter Five: A Widow's Story - Laurent

Pauline Laurent's story, drawn from her autobiography, *Grief Denied: A Vietnam Widow's Story* (1999), tells of her relationship with her husband Howard and his subsequent death in Vietnam, which was to define the rest of her life. Her story (covering thirty years of often dysfunctional and conflicted grieving) consists of linking passages connected to a skeleton of letters to her dead husband, providing a case study of the experience of long-term grieving that finds some resolution, or at least understanding, in her eventual visit to the Wall to deposit the letters there some thirty years after her husband's death. In this extended narrative, Pauline provides a fuller and more sustained evidence of the importance of narration and the sense of journey than we find in the other, single and more contained widows' letters from the last chapter. The chapter does, however, clearly reference them, and is unique to their conception and purpose, if not their structure. The letters offer a wider understanding of the use of narrative than the briefer, single letters and are much more evident of the way bereaved people may use objects to represent fulcrums, or steps, in the experience of grief.

Couplet Two: Veterans

Chapter Six: Veterans at the Wall

This chapter explores the phenomenon of Vietnam veterans using the Wall and the objects that they place there. It will seek to demonstrate a linkage between veterans and the Wall, which will describe the initial evidence of grief and loss in this specific group. In so doing, this chapter will draw upon a large volume of work from authors, such as Schulzinger, Scruggs, Breende, Jeffreys-Jones and Ashplant, who have all, from different perspectives, explored the political and personal consequences of Vietnam for veterans post war, and the deep process of alienation and isolation, incorporated in a sense of loss expressed there.

The thesis will then seek to describe how specific grief models, such as Parkes' psycho social transitions in relation to 'assumed' understandings of self and society can provide a descriptor for the actions of veterans at the Wall and the role of the Wall itself. In this, it will utilise some personal narratives. Finally, with reference to authors such as O'Brien and Allen, I will demonstrate that collections of objects deposited at the Wall evidence a continuing narrative and bond to the dead and to the survivors' personal memories.

Chapter Seven: A Veteran's Story - Luttrell

This chapter forms the second part of the couplet addressing Vietnam veterans' experience of grief and loss expressed at the Wall utilising specific objects. It will focus on one man's (Luttrell) experience of depositing a letter and photograph at the Wall. Using the framework of the teleogenic plot, the chapter will explore his two-fold journey from that point, into his past to reconnect to his personal history and his narrative projection into the future. This exploration results in a unique 'second' depositing of a MARS object with a Vietnamese family described, in part, in his own words and in the narrative of a commentator filming for NBC. Using continuing bonds theory, psycho

social transition and narrative theories, including Heonik Kwon's (2008) 'ghost narratives', this chapter will explore the role of material culture and specific objects in helping a deeply distressed veteran to make sense of his experiences of grief and loss.

Couplet Three: Politics

Chapter Eight: Cultural and Political Users at the Wall

This couplet of chapters will explore the impact of the Wall on the way American culture and the dominant political structure has responded to death and loss in the years since its inception. By examining the role that the Wall has for certain groups and individuals today, this study will draw attention to the way attitudes and assumptions about the Vietnam War have changed and evolved in the decades during and after the Wall's construction. A key focus of this research will be the national narrative and conflicted cultural identity found at the Wall, including the narrative's political implications and potential for manipulation. These chapters will also explore the use of the AIDS quilt, which found its genesis in the Wall, and of specific objects placed at the Wall in managing loss and grief.

A key role for this couplet will be to provide a political reference and overview of the use and implications of the role of the Wall, which (not always positively) establishes its function in relation to the preceding chapters. In this sense this couplet will show how the political controversies during the Vietnam conflict continued and developed post war, and provided a backdrop for movements such as the MIA/POW and other groups, which offers a key perspective in exploring and understanding loss and grief at the Wall.

Chapter Nine: A Political Story - Coppin

This chapter, the second in the 'Politics' couplet, will explore how a singular national political narrative can become incorporated into personal post-war stories. Through developing themes found in Laurent's story and Cottrell's photograph, it will explore

how the grief and loss narratives can be invested in objects – in this case POW/MIA bracelets – in direct relation to an overwhelming, complex and conflicted political situation. Such investment may complicate grieving, rather than allowing either release from long held and painful memories or the forming of continuing bonds with the dead. This research will seek to show why the essential neutrality of the Wall, as well as its contrasting functions of resistance and compliance, has become so important to U.S. culture in the face of political manipulation.

Implications

Chapter Ten: Summary

The Vietnam War forced many changes and challenges upon U.S. Society. The United States had to face the humiliation of defeat, but also a loss of trust in its political and military leadership, as well as a very real reappraisal of what America had become and what it stood for (Scott, 1996, 2004). Significantly, many individuals who may or may not have fought in the conflict suffered a significant loss of identity and direction and this affected the way they related to their society and culture, and how their country, in turn, treated them (Schulzinger, 2006).

My thesis argues that the actions at the Wall capture the experience of adaptation to a changed world at all levels – i.e. mentally, emotionally, practically, politically and socially implied – post-Vietnam. This process includes the loss of confidence that may occur when the familiar world suddenly becomes unknown (Strobe et al 2006: 95). This internalisation of change, due to intense grieving and/or significant loss, may make it very difficult to step aside from the disorganisation and clearly define what has been lost and what remains. Societal (and specifically political) pressures and ambiguities only make this process more difficult. Reordering a sense of who an individual is, both in personal and societal terms, is primarily about retelling our internal stories in any number of ways. This thesis would argue that it is this process that defines the

functioning of the objects at the Wall. It is the retelling, or reordering, of personal (and national) stories of grief and loss, which finds expression in the leaving of a physical object, as conveyed by Kirkham from a material cultural perspective: '*What is left of the one who died is not nothing. Each memory is triggered by something that is left, that is and is memory, is words, is a book, is a table*' (Kirkham 1996: 221). In effect, the absence or loss is filled, or more accurately, bridged, by the object that is left at the Wall. This research will argue that the Wall itself, in this respect, is a stepping-stone in the sea of multiple and diverse losses that allows the users some sort of resolution through reconnecting with their own loss.

Chapter Eleven: Conclusions

CHAPTER THREE

Conceptual Frameworks

This chapter will explore the relationship between bereavement, loss, the politics of the post-Vietnam experience and the objects deposited at, and in relation to, the Wall. This will be achieved by applying some key concepts used by bereavement theorists to the action of ‘depositing’ – ‘continuing bonds’ (Klass *et al*, 1996), ‘narrative’ and ‘psycho social transition’ or PST (Parkes, 1998) – in order to further illuminate peoples’ experiences at the Wall. Whilst compatible with the broader context of continuing bonding activity, PST provides a finer tool for discussing the traumatic sense of loss from the personal, cultural and political contexts evidenced at the Wall. Key to this exploration will be the role of both the objects deposited and the broader context of material culture generally.

My investigation will use a number of different theories in understanding the relationship between ‘loss’ and ‘objects’ in order to demonstrate a contextualised process of grief and loss in relation to specific objects rather than the generalised understandings of authors such as Hass (1998) or Sturken (1997, 2007). To date, no authors have explored either specific grief theories at the Wall or the significant fact that the role of the Wall is dynamic and used differently by the various user groups. With four million visitors a year²³ it is impossible to identify all users. However, by careful exploration of specific object groupings and their attached stories, where known, it is possible to identify how various specific objects relate to both personal and group narratives and identities and how the objects are used to ‘fulcrum’ the loss process in a non-prescribed sequence.

²³ Exchange of emails between U.S. National Park Service and author, 28th Oct 2009.

The chapter will lay the foundations for understanding both the common experience at the Wall and the unique expressions of loss by the various groups, which find focus in this research. More specifically, it will provide a 'Meta-story' of how bereavement and loss may have been played out in increasingly complex, hurt, vulnerable and diverse groups of users of the Wall, from within the whole of U.S. society. Working within this context, the objects left at the Wall can be seen to carry messages, narratives, stories²⁴ or memories (or may be invested with all four). This research will argue that these objects and their associated meanings are related to grief, bereavement or loss to some extent. It will suggest throughout that the model most evident in this process is that of 'continuing bonds', supported by that of psycho social transitions, particularly with regard to the Vietnam veteran community, due to its adaptability to 'trauma'- based bereavement experiences (Kauffman, 2002). This model is, in itself, compatible with 'continuing bonds' theory, but is singular in its ability to represent the trauma of the loss of a loved one and the impact this may have on the bereaved person's understanding of their world. Uniquely, this work will argue that this shared process captures how the Wall user tries to make sense of his or her loss as part of their personal story through materialising that loss at the Wall.

Storytelling is considered to be crucial to the way bereaved people try to cope with their loss (Gunaratnam & Oliviere, 2009), something that is well represented in the way the 'objects' or 'gifts' deposited at the Wall are invested with personal narratives. It is important to set out early in this chapter, that the objects in themselves remain essentially no more than a collection of atoms, which have no identity beyond that which the user invests in them. However, in sociological and cultural terms, they do potentially convey desire, love, loss and pain associated with their use, function and timeframe (Kavanagh, 2000: 103, 173-175).

²⁴ Abbot (2009) suggests that narrative is a complex and flexible understanding of a given stream of information that may not be set in time, location or sequence. 'Story' is much more structured, having a defined beginning, middle and end.

For most of the objects left at the Wall we will never know what the personal stories are of those depositing them, but from some letters, photographs or specific items such as the Navy Aircrew goblets or broken Commissioning sword (Allen, 1995: 91, 142 – see Figure 2), we can gain a very good insight into the narrative invested in the object. It is these stories of loss and bereavement experienced and processed at the Wall that this research will explore and explain.

These objects and grief stories find very different emphases and representations derived from the different groups who use the Wall in complex ways that relate to their own particular experiences. In exploring the nature and orientation of these groups in terms of specific bereavement-related objects, I have identified three specific types. Each group forms the focus of couplet chapters; the second chapter of each of the couplets explores an individual choice of object deposited at the Wall as a unique expression of loss. The first group will be the widows who lost their husbands or partners in the conflict; the second, the veterans of the conflict; the third, the families, friends and others who have been significantly affected in terms of loss, by the war, conflict, politics or loss of national or personal identity and find expression of that loss in the objects deposited at the Wall. In this Chapter I will explore these relationships as a continuum.

The Wall

This exploration of loss will focus upon the purpose and function of the Washington Vietnam War Memorial (the ‘Wall’) in relation to the offerings left at that site. It will interpret these objects in terms of visual bereavement stories and in a wider sense, narratives. The Memorial, containing the names of 58,272 men and women who served and died in Vietnam, draws four million visitors a year.²⁵ These visitors have left over 150,000 ‘offerings’ at the Wall which are catalogued and stored by the Smithsonian

²⁵ Exchange of emails between U.S. National Park Service and author, 28th Oct 2009.

Institute and the (MARS) National Archive. As a war memorial it is unique in this respect.²⁶

The Wall has a dedicated staff and counsellors available to help deal with visitors who often react emotionally in the presence of the memorial. Veterans undergoing 'Post Traumatic Stress' and Bereavement clinical care finish their rehabilitation course by visiting the Site. Commentators who have explored the cultural and sociological function of the Wall agree that this monument is predominantly identified with loss and healing.²⁷

This Chapter will seek to investigate the role of the Wall in people's experiences of bereavement and loss. This undertaking is challenging in that sixty percent of the people visiting the Wall (Appy, 2008) were not alive at the time of the Vietnam conflict. Nonetheless, there is national evidence of pain and loss expressed at the Wall and in the objects left there. There are no existing models of bereavement which fit or explain people's experiences and behaviour at the Wall. Key researchers do, however, provide models of bereavement which help to interrogate what is happening there. Kubler-Ross and Kessler (2005) present research which actions a dying rather than bereavement model, though, from a sociological position, their model is very useful in interpreting cultural and establishment loss and maladjustment, particularly from a U.S. perspective. Parkes (2009) provides a stream of opportunities for comparison and contrast; his psychosocial transition (PST) model being particularly useful in a broadening understanding of 'gifting' at the Wall. Worden (2009) has provided a model of defined phases or 'transitional functions', which may be informative in the more traumatic memories of bereavement and loss seen at the Wall. All of these models capture particular facets of the way people grieve but fail to reflect and illuminate what happens at the Wall. This is both informative and central to this research.

²⁶ Email from Duery Felton, Vietnam Memorial Federal Curator, 17th August 2010 to author, confirming number of items held in storage at MARS.

²⁷ Savage (2009), Schulzinger (2006), Scruggs & Swerdlow (1992), Hass (1998), Murphy (2007).

Continuing Bonds

The following discussions will be structured by the three main concepts of continuing bonds, narrative and their relationship to objects. The term 'continuing bonds' was first used in 1996 to refer to a new perspective on the way people grieve, in the title of the edited collection, *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief*. This collection contains research accounts that challenged the popular model of grief, in which healthy grieving required the bereaved individual to relinquish their attachment to the deceased loved one. The data presented suggested that bereaved individuals were maintaining links with deceased loved ones, which led to the construction of a new relationship with him or her. This finding has led to an exploration of how this continuing relationship may develop and change over time, typically providing the bereaved with comfort and solace. This concept is essential in interpreting what happens at the Wall.

Continuing bonds provides a further frame of reference for understanding the way people grieve at the Wall; one that, together with the use of narrative, and material culture has greater relevance. The flexibility of Valentine's understanding of 'continuing bonds' and the use of narrative in making sense of loss (Valentine, 2008) and Walter's (1994, 2001) contribution to understanding a culture of grief in contemporary Western societies also find a position in and relevance to what happens at the Wall, but, I would argue, from their postmodern flexibility.

A very singular part of this research will suggest that continuing bonds as encountered at the Wall finds its linkage through story and narrative. We are all autobiographical with our own individual stories and our identity is linked and found in these stories and their relationship to the past (Abbot, 2009). A continuing bond with the deceased is mediated by differing narrative models,²⁸ most usefully teleogenic plots, (Gunaratam &

²⁸ 'Story' in this case being a subset of narrative.

Oliviere, 2009) and this changing and flexible narrative form finds its bonding action to the dead (and less specifically 'loss') in the nature of the objects and the Wall itself.

Whilst the 'Wall' itself is an object, it is in the material nature of the singular objects deposited there that bereavement and loss find clearest representation. Pearce, Hallam and Hockey, all recognised experts in this field, identify death objects essentially as a focus of memory for a loved one, although from differing perspectives. Pearce (1994) argues for a very broad understanding of the object which, at times, almost implies that objects have an identity beyond the physical. Hallam and Hockey's work (2001) is based upon a comprehensive understanding of death and material culture. However, both publications are based on a perspective grounded in memory rather than bereavement or loss. American authors, who have focused on the Wall and the objects left there, have also taken this perspective.²⁹

Kavanagh (2000) stands in contrast to the other authors and Pearce in particular, in offering a much more functional and complete understanding of the object. Her contention, that the object has no personality, life or story except that which we foster onto it from our own emotional and cultural needs, is central to my own argument. No author has identified the objects deposited as essentially part of a complex and cultural grieving process. This research will argue that there is clear evidence, not least from the known stories attached to the objects, and an understanding of the functions of the objects themselves, to suggest that this is indeed the case.

The Wall is a complex and multidimensional memorial, which plays a culturally important role in American life. The Wall cannot be understood separately from its political context (Schulzinger, 2006; Savage, 2009) which reflects the changing face of values in U.S. society in the sixties to the present day. Many commentators have written on the changing role of the Wall (Scott, 2004; Jeffrey-Jones, 1999) and how it

²⁹ Hass (1998) is a case in point.

now manages to hold those who were politically diametrically opposed in what was one of the most troubled periods of U.S. history, to a point where both soldiers and pacifists, including those with no relationship at all to the Vietnam era, stand together at the Wall on Memorial Day. The Memorial is known throughout the United States as 'The Healing Wall'. This Chapter seeks to provide evidence that this process is directly related to the objects left there, in relation to the monument, becoming 'fulcrums' for resolution and change in terms of loss and closure; both as expressions of American history and the personal experiences of the visitors.

The usefulness of an explanation which expresses the contributions made by objects to the grieving process is that there is currently no clear understanding as to this relationship and no process to validate contemporary bereavement experience and practice in this regard. This research will seek to identify and explain the relationship between the objects deposited by different 'user groups' at the Wall. It will utilise the concept of 'continuing bonds' theory and bonding activity in maintaining and engaging a continuing relationship with both the deceased and other forms of loss. In this, it will be necessary to show how the Wall acts as a means of discovering how the dead remain a part of the lives of the living, and the strength of the social bond that transcends the life-death boundary, in spite of a political context that discouraged this.³⁰

Whilst continuing bonds theory will form the basic template for exploring what happens at the Wall in terms of loss, there is significant earlier research which is important in seeing this bonding as an active strategy. In a paper published in 1983 titled 'Death and Personal History: Strategies of Identity Preservation' David Unruh (1983) explored the reintegration of the bereaved into society. Implicit in his research is the notion that emotional attachment of survivors to the deceased may continue for long periods of time after separation through death. His research examines how this emotional attachment is socially accomplished.

³⁰ Howarth (2007) explores the possibility of dismantling the boundaries between life and death in establishing an enduring relationship within her work.

Unruh suggests that before they die, people interpret and apportion cues to their personal identities for those who will survive. Conversely, survivors are left with images, materials, objects and the wishes of the deceased which must be sorted and selectively preserved. He seeks to analyze the actions of both parties as strategies of identity preservation. What is significant here for my research is that Unruh is suggesting a continuing bonding process, which is an extended relationship between the living and the dead mediated by personal narrative (story), recollection and objects. It sets grief into a socially connected, material perspective with direct relevance to my own research at the Wall.

Unruh goes on to suggest that dying people and their survivors use a 'hierarchy of prominence' to give some identities preference over others. Thus, some identities offer greater rewards, provide access to relationships, or dramatize great sacrifices. This idea is crucial in recognising that it is impossible for the dying or their survivors to preserve all aspects of the dying person's multiple identities. They preserve some identities and downplay, ignore, or discard others, some of which will be explored in the widow's letters in later chapters and in particular 'Laurent's story'.

Throughout their lives, people acquire objects and imbue them with personal meanings which represent past accomplishments, talents, journeys, and sentiments (including letters). When people are dying, some objects may become artefacts of their personal history. The accumulation of artefacts is a strategy by which the dying preserve identities over time and communicate their importance to survivors in which personal identities and feelings about oneself are located, invested, and stored in material possessions. These include scrapbooks, photo albums, mementoes, souvenirs and jewellery which symbolize both personal histories and shared biographies. Although Unruh does not address this, this research will suggest that veterans who have lost

much in the war, such as innocence, youth, friends, relationships and perhaps respect, also use objects in the same way without necessarily being singularly related to death.

Unruh also suggests that survivors maintain an emotional attachment to those who precede them in death by drawing from two sources of information. First, they reinterpret past experiences and knowledge of the deceased and imbue them with personal meaning, a process that this research will seek to show being deployed in the 'Widows Chapter'. Second, the dying supply survivors with information, requests, and desires regarding how they themselves wish to be remembered, or in terms of the Wall users, perhaps how the living feel that they might wish to be remembered. This approach would clearly have interpretative conflicts, which are represented in Chapter Eight, Cultural and Political Users at the Wall. Unruh states that four strategies enable survivors to preserve an emotional attachment: reinterpreting the mundane; redefining the negative; continued bonding activities; and sanctifying meaningful symbols. In reinterpreting the mundane, survivors are left with a plethora of images, thoughts, and memories³¹. Some exceptional feats or characteristics of the deceased may live on in the minds of survivors, but much of what remains is ordinary and mundane.

Just as dying people engage in self-reflection and interpret their pasts before death, survivors tend to 'idealize' the deceased, thereby simultaneously increasing the deceased's status and helping alleviate grief. Some view idealization as unrealistic and pathological. It is arguably preferable to emphasize its function in preserving identities, structuring reminiscences, and sustaining emotional attachment. The point is not that actions or qualities viewed as negative when the deceased was alive are positively redefined; rather, the negative provides additional evidence for an identity, which - good or bad - is part of the survivor's memory. Thoughts about negative qualities may spark reminiscences, which keep the survivor and deceased emotionally connected (Figure 5). People create shared biographies through joint activities, processes, events,

³¹ A concept that Sturken also recognises in her research (1997)

and acts; climbing, singing, going to the theatre, shopping, or making love all bond aspects of the self with those of others (Unruh, 1983; Kavanagh, 2000). Upon death, these activities may stimulate memories, thoughts, and images of the deceased, and the accompanying identities. Continued bonding activities represent both conscious and unconscious actions.

Some survivors imbue a small number of objects with meanings symbolic of special or exemplary identities of the deceased. In effect, these objects are viewed as 'sacred' symbols of the deceased's life. Grave sites and markers are the most obvious examples: accompanying icons and epitaphs cue observers to exemplary identities or traits. The Wall itself fulfils this role. However, survivors also sanctify many objects or spaces and preserve other identities. Untouched bedrooms preserve memories of siblings, or spouses; places of birth are sites for pilgrimages regardless of current inhabitants; paintings, furniture and the like may be sacred embodiments of the identities of artist, woodworker, and craftsman or combat helmets, knives or foot talc for a Vietnam Veteran. Further, portraits or photographs may become objects of 'worship' or felt communication with the dead (Parkes, 1998; Miller, 2010). Unruh (1983) argues that a small number of objects become sanctified to such a degree that their loss would be as tragic for the survivors as was the death of the deceased. Sanctifying symbols may be a collective endeavour rather than an individual act. Later chapters directly dealing with the objects left by veterans will develop this argument further, though I would argue that with 150,000 items left at the Wall the number is significant in national terms. However Unruh may well be indicating here that only a very few objects hold such significance from an individual perspective.

According to Klass *et al* (1996), in exploring the basis for continuing bonds, mourners can struggle with the need to find a place for the deceased in their lives. There can be many obstacles in expressing pain and loss and this is especially true in terms of this research in relation to a significant and morally suspect war, which the American nation

lost at great personal and national cost. This, in turn, can both complicate a normal mourning experience (Stroebe *et al*, 2008: 193, 245; Shatan, 1973) but also facilitate new ways of expressing the continued bonding process. It is important not only for the individual but also for communities to find a way to relate to the loss sustained. Just as an individual's life is disrupted in a profound way by a death or loss, so too is the larger social/ cultural world, which then requires a process to mediate that loss. Durkheim (1969) supports this assertion suggesting that when someone dies, the group to which the person belongs feels itself lessened and, to react against this loss, it assembles. Collective sentiments are renewed which then lead people to seek one another and assemble together again.

Ritual plays an important role in finding a place for the dead in the continuing world of both the bereaved and their community. In many cultures, religious beliefs and views of life after death govern the experience of the relationship and this (often expressed as spirituality rather than religion) is a significant factor in the experiences found at the Wall. Savage (2009) develops this argument in his research specific to the Washington Mall and unconsciously builds upon Unruh's earlier contention of the 'sacredness' of some personal and national objects. This concept will be explored further in the final chapters of this research.

The development of such a bond has been found to be conscious, dynamic, and fluid. Many mourners' faith systems can affect the way in which they incorporate the departed into their lives, some people believing that the deceased live on in another dimension, something that is significant in terms of mourning expressed at the Wall. Many believe the deceased are there to intervene and support them.³² These very diverse faith systems frequently find expression at the Wall (Figure 3). Others do not have a faith system but rather build the connection out of the fabric of daily life,

³² Professor Stella Pope Duarte wrote a bestselling novel which was semi biographical, suggesting that the Wall was invested with the spirits of the U.S. service people who died in Vietnam, including her own brother (Duarte, 2002).

including their personal history and the sense of the deceased they carry within them. Ritual may be seen, in this regard as liminal, allowing the user to cross from one identity or status to another (Doka, 2002: 135). The significance of ritual at the Wall then should be seen as personal, social and spiritual.

Individuals using the Wall may find themselves dreaming, talking to, and feeling the presence of the deceased (Stroebe *et al*, 2006). Some see the deceased as a role model from whose wisdom and learning they can draw and although frequently the bereaved are angry with the dead, they sometimes turn to the deceased for guidance. They also tend to adopt or reject a moral position identified with the deceased in order to clarify their own values. This process is clearly shown in the widows' letters in the following chapters. Finally, they may actively form their thoughts in ways that facilitate their remembering the deceased and the bond that has been formed and continues post mortem.

Developing this concept, Klass *et al* (1996) argue that grief is never finished, that the way the bereaved relate to the deceased changes as they develop over the life cycle, whether they be young or old mourners. Yet, apart from this approach, there has been a lack of appropriate language for describing mourning as part of the life cycle. Grief tends to be considered as being entirely present or absent in a way that does not take into account that people do not necessarily 'get over it', or find 'closure'. It might be argued that the phrase 'continuing bonds' is one contribution to a new language that reflects a new understanding of this process.

A continuing bond does not mean, however, that people's relationships are fixed in the past. The entire nature and construct of mourners' lives is potentially changed by the death or loss and this is particularly true in terms of a conflicted narrative such as the Vietnam War. The deceased remain both present and absent. One cannot ignore this, and the tension this creates in the bereavement process. The bond shifts and takes new

forms in time, but the connection is always there. Mourners, especially those addressed in the following chapters, may need help from their support networks to keep their bonds alive or to let the deceased rest. Where such support is not available, the resulting vacuum for the expression of grief, most essentially found in terms of a continuous personal narrative, may be filled by the Wall and the deposits and rituals conducted there.³³ Significant, in this dual process, is the neglected role of objects and material culture in this respect.

This thesis will propose that material culture mediates the relationships at the Wall with regard to loss, death and the dead. The objects and practices that occur there, as well as location and design, call to mind, or are used to remind the visitor, of the deaths of others, the political and cultural trauma and loss, and of unresolved historical and contemporary issues. Whether in the form of personal memento or public memorial events at the Wall, material culture and embodied social practices associated with the dead can be viewed from a variety of perspectives, which might be personal, social, spiritual or political (Hallam & Hockey, 2001: 2). Whilst the objects deposited retain a certain historical specificity, rooted in their production within a particular historical moment, as seen in Coppin's bracelets in a later chapter, we witness their varied uses at later stages in their social lives (Hallam & Hockey, 2001: 8).

Moving (being transported and translated) from one cultural or temporal zone to another, objects are recontextualized and understood in different ways. For example, the letters in the Widows chapters, whilst evidence of a personal grief and loss, have all been deposited openly at the Wall to be read by others. This action may be seen as being supportive of other widows or a personal expression of shared grief, as well as reflecting a real need to express anger, disappointment, and dissolution at the political consequences of the war. In the veterans chapters the war-related objects are of significant historical interest as military artefacts and as anthropological understandings

³³ Pauline Laurent's autobiography, which is the subject of a later chapter, is a case in point.

of soldiers' personal habits and histories. However, they are also expressive of personal pain, unresolved trauma and a lack of ability to adapt to a society which rejected them and most importantly – in terms of Luttrell's photograph and the vast majority of the other veterans' objects – unresolved grief (Sofarelli, 2006).

The cultural/ political chapters, which form the last pair of couplets in my research, express loss and change rather than being dominated by death alone. The objects explored here are extremely varied and reveal a changing mandate for the Wall. In this, Coppin's bracelets are significant of a loss of innocence, of societal conflict, of change and political controversy and of the sense of betrayal through the two women presented, who both use the objects to centre their experience of loss but from diametrically opposed political viewpoints and understanding.³⁴ All of the chapters are focussed on bereavement, loss and personal narrative reflected in and through the objects deposited at the Wall, and in this, it should be remembered that the single most important object remains the Wall itself.

In writing about the Vietnam Memorial Hallam and Hockey (2001), often quoting Sturken (1997), summarise their research by suggesting that the objects and the inscribed names on the Wall work together to recall the dead (Hallam & Hockey, 2001: 173) as all of the commentators that I have researched. I would suggest that what happens at the Wall is in fact far more complex and intense than this. In a more profound way what the widows, through their letters and their depositing at the monument, are trying to achieve is a 'reconnection' founded upon memory but also an intense development of an ongoing and deepening relationship (or bond) through objects and words.

³⁴ Appy (2008) deals extensively with this subject in his collection of Vietnam narratives.

Although Hallam and Hockey (2001) do not recognise this relationship in their work they obliquely recognise it in their emphasis with regard to the performative dimensions of writing and speaking in the context of will making and memorial inscription;

'That writing has been performed, in its execution and reception, tends to connect (or gestures towards the connection of) the bodies of the dying, the dead and the bereaved. Memory writing, in the contexts explored throughout the chapter, emerges as a hybrid form where surfaces of inscription are enmeshed in networks of material objects sustained through embodied practices (including speech). We also note the dynamic aspects of memorial inscriptions in that even when words are "fixed" at officially sanctioned sites of remembrance, they can be supplemented and 're-inscribed' through further written gestures – as in the case of "ephemeral" words, which are brought to graves and monuments in the form of cards and letters' (Hallam & Hockey, 2001: 177).

The Wall is an inscribed list of names, chronologically listed, which, in the case of the widows' letters precisely fits the description and hypothesis expressed in Hallam and Hockey's argument. As I will argue in following chapters, the 're-inscription' that the authors evidence generally is, in the case of the Wall, a 'teleogenic' narrative expression of a continuing bond.

In terms of the veterans and the items that they leave there, a different expression of narrative is evident. The items are clearly 'functional' in the most part. Hass (1998) in her book lists items such as, combat knives, kitbags, hats, helmets, combat jackets, jungle insect repellent, jungle boots and many 'roach clips', and my own research visits to the collection would confirm this broadly utilitarian view, as would the images of the collection found in Allen's book (1995). Since the items from Vietnam are central and

core to the collection at MARS, an exploration of that functional relationship to the depositor and in relation to his or her loss represented in its deposit, is requisite.

Miller describes 'function' as tending to remain our default gear in driving towards any explanation of why we have what we have in terms of material culture (Miller, 2010: 44– 50). It is how we label frying pans to hairspray. He goes on to suggest that as well as dominating colloquial relationships to things it also provides a powerful trajectory of academic thinking. He suggests that the adage 'form follows function' was prominent in modernism and is still evident in architecture. Miller would not suggest that the function of objects is associated with evolutionary need but rather that often there is a wider function for the object which can be social, ritual, spiritual, artistic and, as such deeply symbolic. Whilst I would concur with Miller that design has evidently changed from the purely functional in the context of the objects left at the Wall, at least in terms of the veteran's gifts (explored later in a dedicated chapter), they are often purely functional in design. They frequently consist of helmets, jackets, tin openers and boots; yet, are also deeply symbolic. In none of the 150,000 objects that I viewed at the MARS repository did I find anything new that had been left by a veteran. All of the objects had been changed by wear and tear and judging from the age, most by use in Vietnam. The objects had not been designed to be containers for memories and aids in the grief process, but this function has been literally 'worn into them' by the men and women concerned.

New research about the Vietnamese reaction to war presents a very different, but complimentary approach to the symbolic use of objects, which also supports the notion of their role in continuing bonds. Heonik Kwon (2008) in his book 'Ghosts of War in Vietnam' argues that the omnipresence of ghosts and ghost stories in wartime and post war Vietnam addresses the complexities of war and memory within that setting. By 'functioning' the role of ghosts in many forms in the Vietnamese tragedy, Kwon tells us much that we need to know about the war, its aftermath and about the issues of death,

displacement and the way that culture, narrative, and the continued place of habitation provides a continued bond with the dead for the Vietnamese people. Significantly, this includes the use of objects. In Dong Thu Huong's 'Novel without a Name' a soldier makes a solitary journey home through the war torn jungles of the central highlands. He encounters the skeleton of a dead soldier. Believing that he was led to the body by the spirit of the dead man, he promises that he will take his diary back to his mother:

'I'll bring your belongings to your mother. If by some misfortune she has left us, I'll visit her tomb, light incense, and read your diary to her from beginning to end' (Kwon, 2008: 1).

The spirit of the dead soldier is born in the objects and carried to the mother to enable a continued bond between them even if the mother is dead herself. His form of continuance by object investment has particular importance when we address Luttrell's story in a later chapter.³⁵

Miller (controversially) suggests that all of the professional bodies in Western societies have been responsible, for one reason or another, to blithely ignore even the possibility that objects (or 'stuff' as he describes it) play a significant role in the way we too deal with death.³⁶ There is literature on 'stuff' in relation to death in our society, but it is almost all concerned with memorialisation of various kinds (Miller, 2010: 147). Miller goes on to suggest that bereavement researchers have ignored the very gradual process of divestment that may take many years. This concept is resonant of a Freudian perception of separation and reinvestment of the emotion, invested, in terms of significant objects and finds support from Volkan's earlier work (1981).

³⁵ For an example of an NVA diary see Figure 4.

³⁶ As I have shown, this is not necessarily true but Miller is identifying a lack of research which directly links bereavement and loss into the use and function of objects, an issue that this research directly addresses.

Initially it might seem that the objects left at the Wall may reflect this contention and indeed in some instances this may be the case. However, I will argue in subsequent chapters that the objects represent a much more complex system of bereavement response, deeply embodied in a diverse range of continuing narratives represented by different objects associated with differing user groups at the Wall. Miller later suggests that we disregard current psychological understandings of bereavement that ignore material culture, in light of his research which suggests that in places like London people use 'stuff' to help them deal with loss of all kinds; *'People use their divestment from things to maintain a control over the process of separation which is less violent and sudden than death. Since this is not socially recognised as a ritual of separation, they find their own routes to this process'* (Miller, 2010: 148).

Miller identifies a perceived lack of understanding of the importance of objects in the grieving process³⁷ but he significantly fails to establish a link between the importance of the object and a 'divestment' as he calls it, in his argument. He does not cite any significant recent bereavement models, research or authors nor argue for any deeper understanding of the grieving process in his work. Despite this, Miller has recognised and presents a valid argument for the central role that objects play in people's grief, which finds validation, in this research, at the Wall.

Although to use an often repeated material cultural quote 'every object tells a story', and much of my research is about proving that hypothesis in relation to loss. Nonetheless, in terms of the veterans expression of grief, Parkes' concept of psycho social transitions (PSTs) does provide a very apt model to explore the particular grief and loss journeys found in the violence and loss incurred whilst actually fighting the war in relation to the experience of the veterans and then in their actions at the Wall.

³⁷ This is controversial; it might well be argued that psychology is distinctly required to deal with the psyche or 'self', leaving a broader comprehensive understanding to other disciplines.

Psycho Social Transitions and Objects

Parkes continued to progress his understanding of the grieving and loss process, focusing closely upon those factors which precipitate breakdown following bereavement. His work has engaged with many different forms of loss including 'traumatic' loss and the role of the 'assumptive world' with regard to self and social identity (Parkes, 1998, 2009). More recently he has taken a more social perspective on grief, in which he has conceptualised the experience of bereavement as a 'psycho social transition' (PST) (Parkes, 1998). In this, he recognises the intimate relationship between personal and social realities, rather than focusing solely on the individual 'grief reaction'. This will have an important contribution to my understanding of what happens at the Wall and within the personal stories of some traumatised veterans. The PST model emphasises the impact bereavement has on our 'assumptive' world or the 'taken for granted' reality that we construct in relation to others. As such, it reflects the approach of the sociologists Berger and Luckman (1971) and their emphasis on the way that we construct, affirm and maintain our sense of reality and identity by engaging with others through language, writing, ritual and social activities. We then take this socially constructed world for granted, unless something happens to call it into question, such as the loss of someone we love, an experience that may precipitate a major breakdown of our assumptive understanding of our world and our place within it. This concept can also be applied to the impact of the Vietnam War on American Society.

Other models have been developed, reflecting Parkes' emphasis on the need for the bereaved to adapt to a changed reality. Perhaps the most influential of these is Stroebe and Schut's (1999) 'dual process model' (DPM), which rejects bereavement as a linear process of 'stages or phases' presenting a dynamic and flexible model that allows for individual, social and cultural differences and a more 'fluid' personal reaction to grief and loss. As such, the DPM suggests a process of 'oscillation' between 'loss-orientation' and 'restoration-orientation', by which bereaved people at times 'confront' and at other

times 'avoid' their loss (Valentine, 2008). Some people and certain cultures may emphasise one or other of these orientations, whilst others oscillate between the two according to their own personal rhythm. It has also been suggested that differing sexes use the model differently. Although the DPM is certainly more flexible than what has preceded it, I would argue that it remains very limited in its social, cultural and traumatic interpretations of the grieving process. I have, to date, found no reference to it in any understanding of grieving or loss in the objects left at the Wall, or in the use of the Wall itself, as a place of ritual.

These models prioritise individual psychology and bereaved people's personal resources in relation to the 'work' or 'tasks' that need to be accomplished to achieve resolution (Worden, 2009) over that of cultural or social need. Parkes promotes the need for grief counselling in order to make the necessary psychological adjustment to a world where the bereaved person can 'move on'. He accepts that the grief process continues but promotes a significantly diminishing relationship. This approach receives significant support from Kauffman's (2002) 'Loss of the Assumptive World: A Theory of Traumatic Loss' where a series of authors, including Parkes himself, make this point.

Crucially this perspective does not take account of the diversity of views and understandings, including the use of significant objects, in which death is experienced in very different dynamics and influenced, often partially, by many different spiritual, cultural, political and psychological factors. Rather, grief may involve transforming one's relationship with the deceased person, or the lost subject, and incorporating him or her into one's life in a way that promotes a continued relationship but perhaps from a very different perspective and position.

Valentine (2008) suggests that explanatory models have real value if used eclectically rather than prescriptively, as they can provide useful insight into adjustment to loss. However, models may over-simplify, giving the impression of order where none may

exist. They can therefore be no substitute for engaging with the bereaved individual's personal struggle to make sense of his or her loss (Wright & Coyle, 1996).

I will attempt to show in the chapters dealing with individual grief and loss that many of the subjects are experiencing their loss in relation to specific grief models, defined within the chaos of their continuing loss and personal stories, even if they are apparently unaware of the existence of those models. Significantly, I believe that they are doing so by using objects as part of a story (meaning) making experience, which may be contained within the larger remit of a continuing bond which helps 'orientate' and 'map' their grief narrative.

Material Culture and Loss

The structure of the Wall, as discussed in the introduction to this research allows a unique interface with those visiting the Wall and the dead they commemorate. But the Wall itself, although allowing this engagement, may not be sufficient for the expression of loss, which is directly related to the trauma of the events being recalled. Although 'Sensations of proximity to deceased relatives and friends are often achieved, in contemporary Western societies, through the written word' (Hallam & Hockey, 2001: 175), material inscriptions may not always be assumed to be permanent or even adequate as memory forms for those engaging with loss. They may be apprehended as insubstantial, as pale traces of persons deceased. To appreciate the fluctuating power of written words within memories associated with death we need to attend to their relation to the body, the materials in which they are fashioned, the wider field of material objects in which they are positioned over time and the ways in which they are reframed and drawn into subsequent acts of remembrance (Hallam & Hockey, 2001: 177). In short we need to look to what people are ritually leaving at the Wall and why.

Seremetakis asks us to think in terms of diffuse ritualisations of death, rather than simply demarcated or bounded death rituals. The concept of 'ritualisation' here refers to the ways in which death is represented across time in a multiplicity of sites and through a variety of practices. This approach shifts emphasis from the "public rites" associated with death to those socially meaningful (death related) performances that are situated within the remit of everyday events (Seremetakis, 1991: 47).

The Wall is in this respect unique. It does not just address formulaic practices of war memorials such as the 'Cenotaph' in London with a significant and identified State-related function, but is fixed as a monument owned and used by the public at large in very diverse and liberating ways³⁸. It encompasses the formalised public performances and aspects of 'mundane' everyday practices, mobilising material objects usually associated with sacred space as well as those located within domestic areas. This allows individualistic practices and helpful patterns to develop. There are some fixed rituals at the Wall but they are developments from public usage, not an imposed regime. Miller addresses this obliquely in his work.

'Stuff is pretty useful. Because if you can't control the way you separate from the living body, you certainly can control the way you separate from, or divest yourself from, the objects that were once associated with that living body.' (Miller 2010: 146)

This concept will find a place in Laurent's chapter in that Miller is using a classic 'release' or Freudian disinvestment strategy, which stands against her experience of her husband's objects. It relates to both her own history and her relationship with her husband, although I will also argue for a linked 'continuing bonding', running through

³⁸ It needs to be acknowledged that the Cenotaph's construction was driven by overwhelming popular pressure following the First World War (Winter 2007: 102-105) and has proved very adaptable in its use following other conflicts. My point here is made with regard to its formal State function and purpose.

Laurent's, Luttrell's and Coppin's stories (developed in later chapters), which runs parallel to a certain 'disengagement' in their narratives.

Taking this concept further, Roach (1996) explores the embodied action in death rituals performed in circum-Atlantic settings. He examines the way in which elements of ritual might create or recreate relationships between the living and the dead, and so repair the social gaps left behind after a death. It is this duality between physical and social loss that finds expression in all of the user groups explored in this research.

Henry Jenkins expresses how physical objects can help mediate the trauma of death, which may help to explain why so many objects left at the Wall have such significance to the gifting users of the Wall, but may seem pedestrian to us.

'I brought the comics on the way to the hospice. They were selected hastily and even then, I felt guilty about the time it took. I was looking for something banal, familiar, and comforting at a time when my world was turning upside down. I read them intermittently as my family sat on death watch, my experience of the stories becoming interwoven with our common memories and the process of letting go of my mother. Retreating from the emotional drama that surrounded me, I found myself staring into the panic-stricken eyes of a young Bruce Wayne, kneeling over the newly murdered body of his parents.' (Henry Jenkins in Turkle, 2007: 196)

This is an abstract from Jenkins' account of his relationship to comic books based upon loss. The overall structure of the bereavement section of the book is acknowledged by the editor to be broadly psychoanalytical. And, whilst it finds a resonance with Miller's arguments, the rest of the chapter focuses on how the comics related to his development during childhood and how he focused his personal narrative through

them. The objects (comics) in this sense were central in both focusing and processing his grief, but also who he was and who he was to become.

Such evocative objects can hold the vast structure of recollection. This is more than just poetic construction – objects can have a profoundly healing function. The British Psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott developed the idea of the ‘the transitional object’. Winnicott located the capacity for tenderness and caring for objects of significant importance to the individual. What is less known, but germane to the purpose of this research, is that they are also the basis of symbolism and creativity (Susan Pollak cited in Turkle, 2007: 228) and therefore are not just ‘connection’ in bereavement but essential milestones and fulcrums in a continuing narrative of caring and relationship as well as self-identify.

Miller (2010: 150-151) states:

‘In London, just as in many other areas, this process is also one in which an individual gradually transmutes into an ancestor by becoming largely remembered with respect to an idealised category. Most of the major divisions in social status and success that occur during life are entirely ignored in the relative homogeneity and equality expressed in most contemporary English grave practice’.

Miller continues to argue that the process also works in reverse. He suggests that just as those who have become lost may become transformed into generic and idealised ancestors by those left behind; the older generation seeks to use familiar heirlooms as a kind of self-simplification to a few treasured or idealised events. They hope that the objects they select will help their descendants to become ‘inspired’.

I would argue against this simplistic approach. Miller does not provide direct evidence of this practice being limited to the older population. The concept of an idealised person represented in the object does find relevance at the Wall. There are, for instance, very few objects that speak of hatred or indifference and the Veterans Chapters in this research, will significantly represent this view. Nonetheless, it would certainly be true to say that the acts of violence and the questionable actions at places like My Lai (Tritle, 2000) are addressed at the Wall and even the widows' letters found in this research show an honest appraisal of the husbands' loss. Even given this; it remains love and loss that find expression at the Wall in many different ways, functioned and established through the use of objects.

'While getting rid of objects quickly is a response to grief, even an act of grief, it is also a way of blocking emotion and a contemplative process. The psychology behind this action may be a temporal-spatial confusion between subject and object: by getting rid of objects quickly, people think that they are moving forwards, when in fact it is they who are left behind. Making objects of the dead go away doesn't make grief go away – there is no magic wand, no "out of sight, out of mind" solution.' (Gibson, 2008: 17)

Gibson is presenting a classic understanding of 'Linking Objects' which have to be eventually, although not quickly, released to allow the 'emotional investment' in the individual to be either reinvested or 'released'. She makes an eloquent case for the objects being used to aid the grief process over time as focal acts for prompting memory and contemplation. However, what happens at the Wall, very often decades after the conflict, is in many ways the opposite. The memories, emotion and trauma form part of recovered individual memory, which is formed by the events, so that individual encounters become part of their continuing contemporary narrative. Undoubtedly people feel a "release" of sorts when they deposit an item at the Wall, but it is often an

act of honouring and marking a change in the relationship that the depositor has to the loss that they have encountered rather than a resolution or completion of the grieving event. This is evident in very different ways in the three couplet chapters that explore this process from three very different user groups at the Wall.

Gibson (2008: 23) also suggests that objects are 'part of us' and that, just as we imprint objects, so they imprint us, materially, emotionally and memorialily. She later claims that 'memories through objects are already there and, like photograph negatives are just waiting to be printed out' (Gibson, 2008: 24). She then goes on to state that 'Objects of the dead can be powerfully symbolic, transforming relationships, and grief, in unexpected ways' (Gibson, 2008: 42). In this, Gibson is repeating a theme taken up by material culture academics like Susan Pearce and others who claim that objects have the potential for emotional memory and in that a primitive capacity for communication.³⁹ I would contend that even in events as traumatic as the Vietnam War and in acute loss and bereavement, this is simply not the case.

Professor Kavanagh, presenting a paper on 'Objects that Speak', at Leicester University,⁴⁰ proposes that there is a rhetoric that concerns itself with the power for objects 'to speak for themselves'. She argues that in cases like archaeology the object is the only source that may be able to give direct evidence. Even so, the evidential value is filtered by culture, by the sense of who, what and when we are. Within this understanding, cultural perception is the key determinant in the reading of material. Objects may become metaphors and metonyms, hard and brutal as that may be. Such a reading must give precedence for the social over the individual and, therefore (as Kavanagh would argue), tidy interpretation over 'deeply conflicted and inconvenient narratives'.

³⁹ Susan Pearce presented this concept at the 'Contested Zones' conference at Leister University, 12th December 2009.

⁴⁰ 10th December 2008.

Kavanagh takes the position that we ascribe meaning to our material world through projections of our emotionally defined selves; cultural perception, important though it is, is only one element. Therefore she proposes that our irrational and emotional selves formed by the dynamic of personal collective interchange and experience, uses the material world to articulate perceptions and positions to support or even replace verbal expression. Key to this understanding is that for an important set of purposes, feelings and experiences are 'transferred' or 'projected' onto the inanimate as a part of both personal and social discourse. Objects are mute; it is we who speak. As Kavanagh says, 'they are the ventriloquist's dummy to the light and shade of our own minds' (Ibid). This finds a very obvious mirror and connection in the work on psycho social transition that I have previously quoted by Parkes.

This collective dialogue uses 'things, places and spaces' in our experiential journey and even in our ability to express or repress psychological conditions. We have the opportunity to hide behind objects and to defer responsibility, such as claiming that 'the plane dropped the bomb on the city' or 'I was only acting under orders'.⁴¹ We remember or forget ourselves by what we choose to hold onto or to let go of. Objects do not tell the story but they can be the props and metaphors within our own personal narratives, which both contest and devolve our identity. This conflict in self-identity finds evidence in veterans' journeys to, and actions at, the Wall in relation to collective grief and remembrance which will be explored in a later chapter.

We constantly redefine our individual and collective identities. This is especially true in relation to emotional extremes or traumatic experiences. The importance then, of non-verbal communication, including the touch and sight of material objects, cannot be underestimated as they can be agents for healing, recovery and transitional process. Current material culture literature frequently regards the 'object' as the 'subject' in this regard. It shares this approach with a good deal of anthropological and 'new age'

⁴¹ Drawn from evidence given at the My Lai trials, for a fuller discussion see Tittle's 'From Melos to My Lai'.

literature (Csikszmentmihalyi, 1990). Kavanagh (2000) addresses this point by suggesting that objects objectify the self, more than a belief that there is a differently empowered focus to that of the human one. Much of this area of thought has some excursions into case study with examination of the ordinary, and extraordinary, with peculiar tales of things behaving as if sentient; indeed as an alternative life form.

Very significantly, Sturken, New York University Professor of visual culture develops a very powerful argument in this regard. Like Kavanagh, Sturken rejects any spiritual life for an object. She argues that at the Wall, the Oklahoma bombing and the 9/11 site, that Americans have responded to national trauma through consumerism, kitsch sentiment, and practices in ways that reveal a tenacious investment in the idea of America's innocence. Sturken contends that a consumer culture of comfort teddy bears and branded T-shirts left at specific sites enables a national tendency to see U.S. culture as 'tourist' and removed from controversy. This allows Americans to feel good about visiting and buying gifts from sites of national mourning without having to engage with the social and political consequence of the events memorialised.

To some degree this concept does have some evidence at the Wall and Sturken's arguments will find a significant place in the cultural/ political chapter on user groups later in this study. However, I would contend that with regard to the actions at the Wall at least, Sturken is mistaken in this. Indeed, I will argue at this memorial at least, the use of objects and their relationship to material culture has a directly reversed effect, that is, not allowing the Wall user to avoid engagement but positively engaging the user in a direct rendezvous with their past and, in that, also their future (see Figure 5). The work of Young (1999) in identifying an American society so divided that it was on the point of self-destruction during the Vietnam conflict, reinforces the uniqueness of the 'healing' Wall. This is a role that other monuments in America, and indeed the world, do not share. Whilst there is an increase in the 'fluffy' objects deposited at the Wall, the

vast majority are very significant and important mementoes which link the depositors to very difficult, painful and frank situations of regret and loss (Allen, 1995; Murphy, 2007).

As argued in this research, in terms of the Vietnam veterans and other users of the Wall, I would make a case for objects such as jackets, boots, helmets and letters becoming 'fulcrums' of change in a bereavement process and certainly not 'Kitsch'. Whilst these items are enormously important to the depositor and the visitor alike, this does not necessitate any belief in the independent power of the object, but may include a spiritual, emotional or psychological investment in that object. This is most clearly seen in the objects that are left at the Wall by the veterans of the conflict in particular.⁴²

'The things they carried were largely determined by necessity. Among the necessities or near necessities were P-38 can openers, pocket knives, heat tabs, wristwatches, dog tags, mosquito repellent, chewing gum, candy, cigarettes, salt tablets, packets of Kool-Aid, lighters, matches, sewing kits, Military Payment Certificates, C rations two or three canteens of water. Together these items weighed 15 – 20 pounds, depending on a man's habits and rate of metabolism. Henry Dobbins, who was a big man, carried extra rations; he was especially fond of canned peaches in heavy syrup over pound cake. Dave Jensen, who practiced field hygiene, carried a tooth brush, dental floss, and several hotel-sized bars of soap he'd stolen on R & R in Sydney, Australia. Ted Lavender, who was scared, carried tranquilizers until he was shot in the head outside the village of Than Khe in Mid April.' (O'Brien, 1991: 3-4)

In his autobiographical novel, O'Brien uses the objects that the soldiers carried in the 'boonies' as a metaphor for the other things that the men carried; love, hate, ghosts, hopes, fears, forgiveness, self-loathing, pain and loss. The objects that continually

⁴² New interns at the MARS facility are specifically warned against trying to interpret this.

people his pages are not just symbols but very real and functional fulcrums in the soldiers' lives. This is more than a narrative metaphor or device; it is all the men have. If you take the objects away, the men have nothing, the men become nothing. This, suggests O'Brien, is Vietnam for the United States.

It is important to note that the continuous lists of objects that O'Brien spins his narrative around are matched and accurately reflected by very large amounts of objects deposited at the Wall and stored at the MARS repository (Allen, 1995; Hass, 1998). This is not accidental. O'Brien is not guided by the objects deposited at the Wall; he is simply in symbolic alignment with the men and women who are leaving them there. O'Brien was himself a combat 'Grunt' in Vietnam, something that is essential in understanding the symmetry in his work with regard to the Wall. They were called Grunts because they carried all that they needed in their sack, and grunted when they picked it up. If they dropped anything, they might die.

What they carried defined who they were:

'As a first lieutenant and platoon leader, Jimmy Cross carried a compass, maps code books, binoculars, and a .45 calibre pistol that weighed 2.9 pounds fully loaded. He carried a strobe light and the responsibility for the lives of his men. As an RTO, Mitchell Sanders carried the PRC-25 radio, a killer 26 pounds with its battery. As a Medic, Rat Kiley carried a canvas satchel filled with morphine and plasma and malaria tablets and surgical tape and comic books and all the things that a medic must carry, including M&M's for especially bad wounds,⁴³ a total weight of nearly 20 pounds' (O'Brien, 1991: 6).

⁴³ If morphine failed to kill the pain, Medics in Vietnam would give the red M&M tabs as they looked like oral morphine to the badly wounded, as placebos.

For this concept of self-identification through significant objects to be valid, if even at a subconscious level, there has to be the conviction that the object has auras, resonances, memories, echoes or even power resonating from the past including, from the Vietnam War perspective, the essential elements of trauma, violence and multiple losses. This mental 'empowerment of objects' has become infused by the smell, history or memory that the objects invoke. Most essential in this is that the objects are associated with the individual who wrote, used or wore them and the culture that he/ she existed within. What the objects do is invoke feelings. This approach connects both shamanic and psychotherapeutic understandings;⁴⁴ which sits in direct opposition to Sturken's assertions about a 'comfort culture' but is strongly evidential of a continuing bonding process.

The objects at the Wall are not only linking objects or emotionally charged articles which facilitate a connection to the dead that needs to be resolved, as Gibson or Volkan might argue. Rather, they act as 'fulcrums' or 'engines' in the grieving and loss process. They perform a difficult and functional operation by enabling those who have invested emotionally in their use, ownership or creation, to convey the narrative of their continuing bond. They archive this in very individual processes but this study will argue in the following chapters that there are clear group identifiers that can be recognised in this process. The objects remain just that, objects, but the way individuals use them, deposit them and ritually release them operates to both continue a bond, and to define individual meaning in the loss suffered.

The Political Use of Grief at the Wall

One of the key findings of my research has been the centrality of politics in the role of grief and loss at the Wall which continues to this day and is obviously linked to the

⁴⁴ The collection at MARS evidences a large amount of North American Native items which might be described as 'totems'. Pauline Laurent, a white western woman, in her chapter describes creating such an artefact. These items are imbued with physical, sacrificial and emotional attachments. See Allen's book (1995) for a number of examples.

cultural issues previously identified. The political context of loss in relation to the Vietnam conflict finds a structural role in all of the research conducted in this thesis. I will explore this aspect specifically and in depth in the last of the user group couplets (Politics) although it finds key resonances in all of the chapters.

Holst-Warhaft (2000) in her book on politically manipulated grief culture summarises the situation that contributed to the sense of loss and disenfranchisement that has made the Wall an 'anti monument'. Savage (2009) suggests, because it arouses passion, grief can always be manipulated for political ends. It may be positively harnessed as a means to effect political change, and it may be callously prolonged and exacerbated. He further suggests that institutions, secular and religious, have periodically sought to control the rituals of death and mourning for their political purposes. In contemporary society we have seen an increasing manipulation of grief by the media, by professional counsellors of the bereaved, by the creators of a spate of monuments and museums designed as sites of communal mourning and by the funeral industry. I would suggest that nowhere is this truer than in the MIA/ POW issue:

*'There are facts,
And there are facts:
When the first missing man
walks alive out of the green tangle
of rumours and lies.
I shall lie
down silent as a jungle shadow,
and dream the sound of insects
gnawing bones'* (W.D. Ehrhart, 'POW/ MIA' – left at the Wall).

This poem points to one of the most significant and defining functions of the Wall; that this is where the missing find full acknowledgement alongside the dead. The

importance of this in terms of the Vietnam War and what happens at the Wall simply cannot be overestimated. As we see in the 'Widows' chapter, this function of the Wall is so strong in terms of national identity that frequently it becomes the chosen site of memorial over the graves of those soldiers who were returned home.⁴⁵ It is centrally connected with the U.S. MIA political structure (Schulzinger, 2006).

The issue of the return of remains of American serviceman classified as missing in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia remains one of the most inflammatory political issues in the United States. The only flag that has ever flown over the White House besides the Stars and Stripes is the black and white POW/ MIA flag depicting a shackled prisoner with bowed head. It is flown on Memorial Day at post offices, police stations, and other public buildings across the country. A postage stamp honouring prisoners of war and those missing in action was released on Memorial Day, 1995. In his address to mark the occasion, President Clinton said that although *'we can only imagine the pain experienced by the families of the missing, we know very well our obligation to them and their families to leave no stone unturned as we try to account for their fate and if possible to bring them home'* (New York Times, May 30th, 1995).

What or who could they bring home and were there still POW's in Southeast Asia? Could any still be alive? If not, why did the President feel compelled to speak as if there were live prisoners, as if unaccounted for dead in the Vietnam War were still numerous, and the recovery of both a stumbling block to the normalization of relations with Hanoi? One might also ask why the families of serviceman classified as MIA's were burdened with the additional grief of uncertainty. In a broader context it is legitimate to question why units like the Army Central Identification Labourites in Hawaii expanded their activities, spending millions of dollars identifying each set of remains in Vietnam and why there is such a focus on the recovery of remains from Vietnam when approximately

⁴⁵ Bruce Willis and Emily Lloyd starred in the film 'In Country' (1989) which dealt with this issue and climaxed by visiting the Wall. The film was not a commercial success as it was felt to be far too close to the truth to be comfortable. The original 9mm film (in can) is now held in the MARS collection as a tribute to the veterans and is displayed on occasion in the Smithsonian.

78,000 U.S. military are still officially listed as MIA's from World War II and about 8,000 from Korea (Holst-Warhaft, 2000: 88-9). I would suggest that there is still a bond here between the bodies of the dead, their relationship, as physical objects, to the living and a manipulation of that relationship for political purposes.

The following is a clip from the Chicago Tribune, dated May 29th 1994:

'Their B-26's flight was last seen on its way to Da Nang. Two years ago the Vietnamese government turned over to the U.S. what was left: a few bones, some teeth, a pair of socks, boots, a first aid manual, a .45 pistol and a Sears credit card... Employing anthropologists, deontologists and the latest DNA genetic testing, U.S. Army forensic experts took about two years to make what they consider a positive identification of the fragmentary remains. If a Pentagon review board agrees, the 2,233 Americans still listed as missing in action, including 1,642 in Vietnam, will be reduced by three'.

Note the importance here given not just to the body of the airman, but his personal and government-issued belongings.⁴⁶

The acceptance of very limited remains as a positive step in the bereavement process is common if not universal; it is not as satisfactory as recovering the whole body. Capt. Mark Danielson's remains were brought home to his family in 1993; twenty-two years after his gunship went down over South Vietnam's A Sau valley, the single bloodiest battlefield in Vietnam. At their internment at Arlington his widow said *'for me, putting those remains in the ground at Arlington means completion and a certain kind of peace'.*

⁴⁶ Cited in Holst-Warhaft (2000: 88-89).

His sister, however, was quoted as saying, *'Two teeth isn't his body – big difference'* (People, USA, November 28th 1994).⁴⁷

The mother and sister of the dead Airman had never been able to accept the reports that clearly indicated his death, whereas his widow, who subsequently remarried, had. All three women are active members of the MIA/POW movement but their personal narratives shaped by the objects left recovered from the crash site were different and unique. For the mother and sister, even the most tenuous hope was preferable to the acceptance of Danielson's death.

It remains clear that the US Government was aware that a clear indication of death is preferable to a possible eternal MIA vagueness. This raises a significant question; is the U.S. Government spending approximately \$100 million a year on pseudo grief therapy for the families of the Vietnam War veterans? If not, why the enormous effort to recover remains in Vietnam, which continues today? Gail Holst-Warhaft (2000) in her book on the political use of grieving suggests that the answer lies in the humiliation of the defeat inflicted by the North Vietnamese Army. She suggests that there is a deep trauma left in U.S. society that finds its focus on the humiliating military defeat abroad and the socially divisive treatment at home.

She asserts that far from satisfying the grief of relatives, the military and politicians deliberately inflamed and extended the suffering of many families. Thus, there was a deliberate policy to fly them to Washington and parade and exhibit them in a campaign of self-justification, deliberately designating thousands of known dead soldiers as MIA's; thereby fostering a myth that there were still prisoners in Vietnam long after they knew there were none. The negative effect this had on both the families of the dead and the American nation in terms of its ongoing loss, and attempts to establish a bond to that loss, is obvious.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

The desire to punish the upstart little 'Lilliputian' enemy to regain military and national self-respect is very evident in the series of movies that began with 'Rambo'. Clearly evident in its post-war rhetoric is the pressure to make the U.S. Government punish and isolate the Vietnam 'Savage'.

It is only in recent years, with the restoration of full diplomatic and trade relationships and with U.S. military Anthropological recovery teams working in Vietnam that the myth of the missing may slowly pass and be reburied at official levels in America. But it is not a myth that will lie easy in its grave; it has become a national religion that finds expression and ritual at the Wall.

Authors such as Scott (2004), Jeffreys-Jones (1999) and Schulzinger (2006) all take a much longer and deeper look at the political legacy of the Vietnam War especially in relation to the Wall. Schulzinger in particular presents a very strong argument linking PTSD and bereavement and loss at the Wall as a single event, something which I will explore later in my thesis.

All of these authors explore the enormously complex role of societal disintegration and reformation in light of the immense cultural breakdown post-Vietnam, and this context is essential in understanding the role that the Wall and its objects play in contemporary U.S. society still finding expression today.

Every May thousands of motorcyclists make a cross country journey from South California to the Wall. The journey's purpose is political – to increase public awareness about those who allegedly remain either prisoner of war or missing in action in Southeast Asia. The journey also serves as a pilgrimage for its participants and as a welcome home ritual, which many veterans feel they never received. The riders (many of whom were Peace campaigners and did not fight) are met by crowded lined streets

and a solitary U.S. Marine, in dress uniform, salutes them as they ride by (Michalowski & Dubisch, 2001).⁴⁸

These riders built a custom made motorbike at enormous cost and left it at the Wall. It is now stored within the MARS facility and carries a certificate which states *'This Bike has never been ridden. It is the property of all those who are still MIA in Vietnam and may only be ridden when the last of them return home'*.

Summary

What is apparent in the actions found at the Wall is the central place of meaning-making through personal narrative underlying the essential nature of the gifting of objects.

Hallam and Hockey (2001), as well as other authors, suggest that the use of objects in this way may in some cases be a potentially damaging or even dangerous practice as it prevents 'closure' or the ability to 'move on'. They state:

'...the materials enmeshed in the everyday lives of persons that survive after their deaths can evoke lost presence and present absence in potentially problematic ways. The tensions, ambiguities and contradictions integral to material environments that have undergone a form of 'trauma' or dislocation, can be worked out through further interactions with material objects in social practice. So precarious and unstable is the balance between recovering and relinquishing the dead, between achieving a comforting sense of continuity whilst repeatedly encountering the rupture of an earlier, embodied contiguity, that the

⁴⁸ It is interesting that in 2010 a similar event occurred in the U.K. with both a 'ride to the Wall' and a 'walk to the Wall'. The Wall being in this event the National Arboretum.

nature of materiality's themselves and the way that survivors engage with them is crucial' (Hallam & Hockey, 2001: 103-104).

A key phrase here is 'working out'. It is suggestive perhaps of an interpretation of the need to progress the bereavement and 'resolve' the grief, although it may also indicate a way of living in a difficult circumstance. Both authors have a much broader remit and certainly see grief in a wider aspect which allows narrative and 'reconnection' but in their exploration of the Wall, memorisation is key. In contrast I would propose that in fact the letters and many of the other objects left at the Wall are simply evidence of the need for relationships to continue post-mortem, and is a very positive and useful action in the grieving process, as authors such as Walter (2001) and Valentine (2008) have shown. The life chapter may close, but the narrative develops and continues.

The release and depositing of objects at the Wall as a part of the individual's bereavement 'story' does not suggest that the objects are intrinsically harmful or painful to the owners. Indeed they may well represent the depositing of precious and treasured parts of the owners themselves and their own story. They are certainly 'linking objects' to the dead, as Volkan (1981) would have it, and their depositing may well indicate recognition of a distancing of pain and memory. But, as Allen's (1995) book, which records some of the items deposited, clearly shows by the nature of some of the artefacts, the action of release is one of respect and reconnection rather than 'closure'; a positive 'linking' is made rather than broken, which then allows a measure of relocation of the survivors grief. I would suggest that this finds support in the nature of the 'dead/ living' relationship in Kwon's (2008) work, the 'assumptive' research in Kauffman (2002) and the actions of veterans as represented in Michalowski & Dubisch's book (2001).

A continuing bond does not mean that people live in the past. The very nature of mourners' daily lives is changed by the death. The deceased are both present and

absent. One cannot ignore this fact and the tension that this creates in the bereavement process. The bond shifts and takes new forms over time, but the connection is always there. Mourners, especially children, may need help from their support networks to keep their bonds alive or to let the deceased rest. In the case of American adults this is most notably true when the bodies of the dead are not returned or viewed. Connections to the dead need to be legitimized. People need to talk about the deceased, to participate in memorial rituals and to understand that their mourning is an evolving rather than a static process. In the absence of the body, as Sturken (2007) suggests, an object might help form the bond.

The Wall provides a powerful and very specific example of the power of a social bond which extends beyond death, in spite of contemporary Western individualisation and focus on the therapeutic needs of bereaved people and, in terms of the United States, a very particular social and corporate understanding of the need to 'release, remove, and move forward'. Yet there seems to be a lack of appropriate language for describing mourning as an integral part of the life cycle. People do not 'get over it', nor do they always find 'closure'. The phrase 'continuing bonds' is one contribution to a new language that reflects a new understanding of this process and this research will suggest that what happens at the Wall is another.



Figure 1: The Wall in Summer (Vietnam Veterans Memorial)



**Figure 2: Officer's Shattered Sword. MARS Collection
(Claudio Vazquez: Turner Publishing)**

The Commissioned Officer's sword carries a Hebrew prayer with the Star of David inscribed on the blade. Its braking mid-shaft is militarily symbolic of loss of honour and the depositing of the Vietnam conflict medals reinforces this narrative.



**Figure 3: Native American Deer Sculpture. MARS Collection
(Photograph: U.S. National Park Service)**

The Deer sculpture is a Native American 'Peace' figure and is indicative of the many different spiritual icons left at the Wall and their mixed narratives.



**Figure 4: NVA Diary. MARS Collection
(Photograph: U.S. National Park Service)**

North Vietnamese soldiers all carried notebooks (such as the one pictured left), in which they carried standing orders but also recorded their letters, notes and poems for those they loved at home. Such notes were presented to loved ones if they returned home, as there was no access to private mail during the war.



Figure 5: 'Meeting' (Danny Day: Vietnam Veterans Memorial)

Figure 5 may seem at first glance to be a little idealised but it is anything but. Behind the soldier is a burning village which represents the U.S. scorched earth policy in Vietnam that led to instances such as My Lai. Note the face (Angel of Death) in the clouds above the soldier. This complex image represents both the love between Widow, daughter and Father but also the nature of his service, and potential guilt in his actions in Vietnam. The image is deliberately simplified to reflect the nature and respect showed at the Wall in contrast to the actions of some groups in Vietnam.

CHAPTER FOUR

Widows at the Wall

Introduction

The exploration of widows' grief following the Vietnam War has been little researched separately to the early studies of veterans returning from the conflict. Yet this thesis will argue that their letters, written over the years since the war, are indicative in many cases of unique experiences of bereavement, related to extraordinary circumstances of loss, or in many cases, multiple losses related to the Vietnam conflict. This chapter will explore how widows have engaged with such losses through the creation and depositing of letters to their dead husbands, at the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington DC. I will show how the use of an object, in this case, a written narrative, can be seen as an expression of a 'continuing bond' that serves to renegotiate the relationship with both the widows' former husbands and a radically changing society. It will explore the use of narrative in terms of a story line with a 'teleogenic plot', or a plot that produces a resolution which aims to elicit an emotional response from the reader. By deconstructing the narrative threads in some examples of these letters, I will seek to demonstrate how they serve as 'fulcrums' in a complex and evolving grief conversation.

For many Americans the Wall has become a place of healing and hallowed ground.⁴⁹ The memorial attracts four million visitors a year.⁵⁰ As discussed, these visitors have left over 150,000 objects (gifts) which have now been catalogued and stored by the Smithsonian and the Federal Archive. Many of these items, where their history is known, are left by veterans, families or friends; very few objects are left by the widows

⁴⁹ Scruggs & Swerdlow (1992), Hass (1998: 57), Murphy (2007: 23 & 146) and Lin (2000: 4-14), from different perspectives, all attest to the sense of sacredness at the Wall.

⁵⁰ Exchange of emails between U.S. National Park Service and author, 28th October 2009.

of servicemen.⁵¹ The objects associated with this comparatively small, but arguably significant group are letters, poems and notes written by those who deposit them. In this chapter I will explore how these letters become part of a narrative, which allows the widows to explore and renegotiate their 'continuing bonds' with their dead husbands, rather than finding 'closure' or 'internalisation' of their grief (Klass *et al*, 1996).

Whilst researching at the MARS federal archive I came across dozens of widows' letters left at the Wall. Many of the letters are included in Laura Palmer's book on the subject (Palmer, 1988). Her criteria for inclusion was twofold; first, she wanted to find expression for the personal and cultural sadness of the Vietnam War and second, to give the grieving authors of the letters a voice that they had been denied. Palmer chose to do this using an extended narrative based upon an interviewed history. This approach produced a very good book but was problematic from a research perspective. The women's background stories, often told long after the depositing of the letters, could not be verified and were subject to the knowledge that they would be published. For this reason I chose not to use any of the published narratives associated with the original letters.

This study focuses on three letters drawn from a much larger sample. The selection was based upon clearly identifiable themes including evidence of a continuing bond as revealed, uniquely, by a teleogenic plot. Whilst not all the widows' letters considered displayed these themes, the vast majority did. Other common themes that guided selection were the cultural and political consequences of loss experienced in the Vietnam era and conflict, the need to derive meaning from the events and the unique expression of loss and continued relationship experienced through the narration. These combinations of attributes were unique to the widows' letters, all of which are drawn from the Federal archive of objects left at the Wall.

⁵¹ Hass (1998); Allen (1995); and discussion with Duery Felton, Collection Curator, and the staff at the Memorial.

It was clear from the content of the selected letters that bereaved women maintained links with the deceased that lead to the construction of a new relationship with their former partners, and to some degree their society. This relationship has been subject to change over time, and clearly provides the women with some comfort and solace. Rather than experiencing death as finality and the task being one of internal adjustment to the 'reality of death', these letters challenge the boundary between the living and the dead. They identify how the women's relationships may survive death and how the deceased influence those they leave behind. The focus is placed on how bereaved people make sense of, and manage the changed nature of their relationship, often by using significant objects to help with the expression of that change, in this case, letters. Bereavement by these women and in these circumstances may thus be seen as a continuing narrative and ongoing process of negotiation and meaning-making (Howarth, 2007).

Unruh's (1983) sociological work on preserving identity post-mortem which, significantly, predates continuing bonds theory, suggests that this emotional attachment is reinforced by actions on the part of the survivors, which help to preserve some of the deceased's multiple identities, often for long periods after death has occurred (Unruh, 1983: 340). The concept of an active relationship is fundamental to this chapter. I suggest that the need at specific times to do something, take action (in this event – write and deposit that writing at a ritual site), can be essential not just in maintaining a bond, but in actively engaging and negotiating with it or, rather, with the dead person. In recent years, authors such as Valentine (2008) have developed this argument highlighting the narrative aspect of the bond. In her book on war grief, Acton has suggested that through language, letters are a primary means by which individuals construct themselves in an endeavour to '*record events and emotions and attempt to control an unstable environment*' (Acton, 2007: 9). What is crucial here is to understand how these letters enable the writer to regain some 'control'.

Recent research into the use of narrative in therapeutic situations suggests that the concept of a teleogenic plot is a sound approach for understanding the role of story in bereavement (Paley 2009). This is a plot that reflects back upon itself and has many layers or spirals and signals the conviction that the end writes the beginning and shapes the middle, thereby making it possible to see narrative proceeding in reverse. Stories are frequently constructed in retrospect and this is very important in understanding what is happening when widows deposit letters at the Wall. I would contend that they are retelling their stories, or reaffirming and restructuring their personal relationships with their former husbands in light of their present social and personal circumstances and agendas.

This teleogenic perspective has another function, in that it may prime the reader for an outcome which is often unpredictable but also very necessary.⁵² All stories create the expectation of resolution, frequently in unpredictable ways - some stories fulfil them (Gunaratnam & Oliviere, 2009: 25). The letters serve the purpose of retrospectively recognising difficult and often neglected grieving. Because they are structured at the time of writing they can reach back in time and integrate the widows' experience to include their dead husbands and in this reinforce, or recover, continuing bonds, which have either been lost or denied. Hence, the use of a teleogenic plot is flexible enough to bring back a presence once felt irrevocably lost. Vellman suggests that, in relation to bereavement, this process of storytelling promises 'completion' (Vellman, 2003). However, I would argue that the letters show that this is not necessarily the case and that, for widows, it represents more of a chapter progression; an ability to move on in a new and accepted relationship with their former spouses.

Another useful aspect of a teleogenic approach is that it functions using cultural traditions that offer a store of plot lines, which the post Vietnam community both know and identify with, hence the concept of an accepted master plot (Abbot, 2009). This can

⁵² Palmer (1988) gives a number of examples of these types of narratives in her book.

best be seen in the various aspects of the Wall.⁵³ Many authors describe the Wall as an anti-monument (Savage, 2009) where the defining relationship of the public to grief and loss has found a new and unique expression (Murphy, 2007). But this expression, while distinctive to the Wall, is both generic and corporate. The use of objects and letters left there has advanced over time and a new tradition with its own rules and uses has evolved. Thus, a type of 'master' or 'meta-story' has developed, which this research is exploring. For example, the Wall has its own celebration days, such as Mother's Day when only mothers and wives can go to the Wall (see Figure 9), which is covered with single red roses; Father's Day is similarly celebrated. Apart from the more obvious Veteran's Day there is also a Christmas tree day among other celebrations (Murphy, 2007). In this the Wall itself functions much as the letters do in re-establishing relationships and in providing significant occasions for the reforming of those bonds.

Discussion of widows' letters

Hedtke and Winslade (2004), in their work on remembering the dead through constructive conversation, propose that within narrative function in grief therapy the counsellor actively pursues a relationship between the dead and the surviving network of living relationships in order to bring about resolution of that loss within the therapeutic program. In this there is a Western tendency to turn flexible models into a prescription for healthy grieving. I remain unconvinced that this reflects what is happening at the Wall. I believe that the 'function' or 'action' is what is significant and uniquely represented here. Narrative is what people do; it is a meaning-making activity. The stories, letters and objects are all significant for what they tell us about the widows and their own understanding of loss. Their action in writing them and delivering them is a part of that narrative and negotiation. The following letter left at the Wall in the late

⁵³ It has been suggested that two additional statues contribute to the Wall's meta story but that both do so from either a political construct (Three Soldiers) or from a recognition of service (women's statue), rather than bereavement objects, and are thus outside of the remit of this research.

1980's, is a case in point; as are the two that follow it. The first two of these letters are considered sentence by sentence to demonstrate the use of the teleogenic plot as an analytical tool, identify the major themes within them and to preserve the teleogenic sense of a connective and coherent discourse.

The third letter is discussed more briefly in relation to the way it differs from the other two.

Letter 1

Dearest Chuck,

This is the first time that I have written to you since April 1970 (a). But I know that you won't think it silly (b). I've written a lot of poems from my heartache of being without you (c). I wished that you weren't shipped out on that early flight. We would have been married before you left (d). Not seeing you after made it hard to believe. I looked for you in the face of every young man (e). I thought about having your baby and making love to you (f). We really were ripped off of the most beautiful things in life.

They told me you didn't die right away. God I hope you didn't suffer too badly. It's not fair (g). They didn't know how gentle you were, how precious (h). I wonder if I will see you in heaven (i). I dream occasionally. They say you then know of my love (j). Remember the letter you wrote. When you said you were fighting a war you didn't understand (k)? It seemed no one really understood. We were only 19 then babe and here I am 16 years later, still wondering. I went to the cemetery once in California where they buried you (l). I hope you saw me (m). This is all very hard for me. Even now I still have the ring you gave me and all the poems and pictures (n). I have a special friend now who understands all

this. He listens to the story of how we met and all the crazy things that we did. He knows how much I love you even now. It's the only thing that did not die or end (o). God be with you Chuck. I'll always dream of you.

Love,

Cher

(a) The length of time since writing (possibly to Vietnam) would indicate unfinished, or unresolved issues which this letter is seeking to address.

(b) Cher is directly addressing Chuck, demonstrating a shared understanding, which indicates a continuing bond.

(c) Cher's Poems, which I think it would be safe to assume are about her relationship to Chuck, is indicative of both a narrative and a need to process her loss.

(d) Chuck will have known of this and I wonder if Cher is addressing a larger audience here? Only letters which are sealed are unread by the museum staff at the Federal Storage facility (Murphy, 2007). Therefore the letter was open and might be, at least partially, aimed at a larger audience. Cher obviously feels this is important and that she is, in a real sense Chuck's wife. In itself, this is indicative of many different types of loss associated with Chuck's death, which is a known factor in complicating the grief process (Worden, 2009: 127-152). Cher has undergone multiple losses of status and respect in becoming a Vietnam War widow. These include financial loss, as Cher would not receive a pension, and given the social construct of the 1960's in America Cher would not have the respect accorded by the veterans' community to formal widows. Colin Parkes identifies this type of disassociation that widows undergo from their world (Parkes, 1998).

(e) This looking for, or searching, is a well understood grief process which is usually over in a short while but can be problematic in profound or traumatic circumstances (Worden, 2009: 29, 174). It is also indicative of a search for meaning.

(f) Cher's sense of loss and pain at being denied a chance to have a baby, and in that a future with Chuck, is evident. The shared intimacy may indicate that her audience is wider than just Chuck but is in itself, significantly indicative of her anger focused in the following sentence. Anger is a very major factor in grief, particularly if the loss is sudden or violent.⁵⁴

(g) Again the sense of anger reasserts itself.

(h) I wonder who 'They' are in this section. The word may indicate the NVA forces that killed Chuck or the US Army or perhaps the protesting members of society who, on occasion were quick to brand returning servicemen as 'baby killers' post Mi Lay (Scott, 2004). There has been some suggestion that such events were to a large extent 'myths', but recent interviews with Vietnam veterans with regard to the Wall show that such events were far from uncommon.⁵⁵ In any event this perception broadens and extends the nature of the narrative context.

(i) This seems to imply a firm faith at least on Cher's part, with a question mark about Chuck's faith (or possibly guilt?). It may also be an indication of Cher's uncertainty in God's existence which would at least indicate a previous belief. In any event there is a clear uncertainty here about their meeting again in an afterlife which is clearly distressing for Cher.

⁵⁴ Worden (2009: 19-20, 91-94, 159-167, 185, 196, 203, 252); Parkes (1998: 80-89).

⁵⁵ The Pentagon produced a half-hour film for its own television channel called 'Recon: Wall Stories – June 2010' found at (http://pentagontv.feedroom.com/index.jsp?auto_ba), sighted 17th June 2010, which featured interviews with returned Vietnam veterans who articulate common abuse.

(j) Again, I am not clear about who 'they' are in this context and I wonder if Cher knows.

(k) This is very telling and raises the question about to whom, in a greater context, the letter is addressed. It has very clear political criticism of the war. Cher is not using her own voice here but has chosen to remind Chuck (and inform other readers) that he, who died fighting the war, was not convinced by the morality of it. The narration of hurt and pain complicated by a sense of unanswered questions, if not betrayal, is profound here and drives the narrative of Chuck and Cher forward.

(l) The fact that the visit was only made once and clearly not at the time of the funeral gives further evidence of a lack of acceptance, possibly by Chuck's family, or of her own inability to deal with his death.

(m) Cher and Chuck's continued relationship and bond is very simply, and profoundly, attested to here. Guilt, itself a recognised constituent of the grieving process, at the lack of visits may also play a part in the narrative at this point.

(n) Renegotiation of loss and relationship finds expression here, these objects are fundamental to the grieving process as mementoes (reminders), but also as motivators for the process of change.

(o) 'I still have your precious things even if a new man has entered my life – there is room for both'; Cher is acknowledging here not only Chuck's loss but the continuing changes and renegotiation necessary for her to exist. The following sentence reinstates Chuck's supremacy in her emotional existence but also a renegotiated space for Cher and her new relationship.

Though short, this letter takes the form of a teleogenic narrative that conveys a long and complicated bereavement story. In a more holistic reading of this letter, further

elements become apparent. In paragraphs one and two the dominant voice is hers; her loss, her pain. The dream is symbolic of a reconnection and continuing presence, perhaps even a reunion or meeting place.⁵⁶ It also emphasises a shift from the 'I' to the 'we'. Yet in the second paragraph she initially shifts the focus to Chuck, asking him 'How has it been for you?', before she returns the focus to herself when she is saying in her visit to Chuck's grave 'see me'. This is important because in much of the narrative Cher is taking Chuck with her through time but here she is reaching out to him. She then goes on to introduce Chuck to the new man in her life, though as someone who can bear witness to her continuing love for Chuck. Utilising the narrative, Cher is able to construct a reality that is inclusive to her and to all those whom she loves. The letter has been a conversation. In this she both acknowledges that she has to some extent moved on, while reassuring Chuck that he is still a part of her continuing life, and she is still caring for him.

I argue that such a letter acts as a fulcrum allowing Cher, in her pain and loss, to renegotiate her love for, and the position of, Chuck in her life. She is negotiating her continuing bond with him. He is still loved and central but there is a little more space now, room enough for the new friend. In this sense then, Cher has not 'moved on' but is indicating her readiness to re-engage more fully with her life, evidenced by a new relationship, which is fully supportive of her previous attachment, allowing her to establish a more settled and open life that can include her grief.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ As we have seen this 'reconnection' finds its basis in Unruh's (1983) paper.

⁵⁷ This sense of duality between continued bonds with a former husband and new bonding is dealt with extensively in Klass et al (1996: 46-70), in terms of the physicality of loss; and in Parkes (1989, 2010), in more holistic terms.

Letter 2

Hi Lover!

Seventeen Years... your still twenty-one – forever young, but gone. Murdered. And nothing will make your loss to us less of a tragedy (a).

The first gray hairs sneak onto my head as I face thirty-seven. I look into the eyes of my teenage son and I wonder – have we done enough to change things... have we done enough... (b)

Waddaya say kid – I brought you flowers. I always brought you flowers didn't I? Picked from the neighbours' yards on the way to the school bus... it's how we fell in love. And then I gave you daises in the mist of all those white slabs of death (c).

Your slab said they gave you a purple-heart – for dying. Well, this here letter is a purple heart for the living. I thought it might mean more to you (d). The paper is a gift from my daughter – she loves purple. She's ten and $\frac{3}{4}$ years old and beautiful, and someday she will have a first love too. I hope he has your kindness and humour. And when she's thirty-seven and still looking for some of those answers, I hope they can touch one another and talk of how they've changed and say thanks for having been a part of my life when everything still lay ahead (e).

It was important for me to come today...to touch your name on the wall that makes it all real... I'm still trying to say goodbye. I never managed that very well with us, did I? But you made all of that OK and that made a big difference in my life. The only way I've ever known to pay you back for that gift is to live my life as if it mattered and to work every day in every way for what is right (f).

Oh, it was wonderful to be in love in the spring of 65. That part of you will always be alive – love doesn't divide, it multiplies. And the me I bring to

the wonderful life and love I share with Dick and our precious, precious children is a me that is part of you (g).

I'll always bring you flowers. You gave me love. Goodbye. Hello.

Carole Ann

(a) Again this letter begins by orientating itself in time. Carole immediately re-identifies her loss, implicitly contrasting her own position – as an aging woman – with that of her husband, who remains eternally young. This section is immediately followed by a very controlled and explicit ‘Murdered’. Here we see Carole’s anger, never far away, explode. She clearly identifies her love very closely with her sense of hurt and perhaps victimhood. She then confirms that there is no recovery from this loss but rather she affirms its tragic and perhaps unnecessary nature. For Carol then, love and loss in terms of Vietnam and her feelings for her husband, are unbroken.

(b) This is an interesting and valid development. Carol is building her theme along different lines. Her own life has changed and she has remarried and moved on. She now has a son and in looking at him and reflecting on her husband’s death, she wonders if the same could happen again. There is also a very clear political comment here. She asks have we done enough to prevent this happening again. Carole clearly identifies herself in the question and also against the Vietnam conflict.

(c) This rather beautiful sentence is typical of a teleogenic plot as it moves back and forwards, creating and renewing links between events and people rather than chronology. Carole’s ‘white slabs of death’ clearly identify her sense of loss and pain and although the bringing of the daises is a reminiscent love link, there is the same evident linkage of anger to that love, as seen earlier.

(d) Note that Carole still uses the term 'slab' not tomb or headstone. The Purple Heart is the oldest U.S. medal issued for being wounded or killed in action and, in this reference; again, Carole takes an established theme set in its own context and develops it in a different direction. She very clearly re-identifies her husband's life rather than his (imposed) death and brings him in into her current family, and thereby her life, this time by introducing him to her daughter. She both continues the bond of love that they shared and reinforces and reinterprets that bond in the changing dynamic of her current life. She does this by interpreting his wishes in this. She is deliberately including him in the narrative and in so doing attempting to care for him and to hold him in the text and in her life.

(e) This is another beautiful tribute to her former lover and an attempt to include him in their potential future.

(f) Carole needed to have left the Wall to have written the letter as she writes of her need to have touched his name there; a clear expression then for the necessity for physical contact. Carole also expresses the need to reconnect with him more intensely using the form of a letter where the use of a flexible narrative allows her the emotional freedom to communicate and sequence her emotions. She expresses the intensity of the relationship and its continuing effects on her now as well as her loss and the real need to share those feelings by the writing, and leaving, of the letter. Carole is also clearly questioning (perhaps throughout her letter) if, or why, she needs to say goodbye. There is a strong emphasis in American culture on the need for 'closure' and, in my view, Carole's letter is signalling an instinctive rejection of that. Rather, the letter expresses the paradox of her sense of her husband's continuing presence in her life while addressing the fact of her husband's death. This is evidenced by Carole's reaffirmation of the debt of love that she may feel she owes her former partner by the way she lives her life – in a sense she carries him with her into the future. What she does need to do is to touch his name on the Wall to 'make it real', something which was

clearly not achieved when she visited his grave. Carol is not in denial of the fact of death; she is reinterpreting her love and her relationship in the light and acceptance of her loss.

(g) This whole sentence reinforces Carole's determination to continue the bond between them. In her final sentence she closes the loop as she opened it, utilising a teleogenic plot.

Letter 3

Joseph E. Sintoni

My dearest friend of all my high school years – My college years. We grew up together – Half-up anyway. I'd hoped we could grow old together. How little I knew how dependent I was on you. We could never talk about losing you – the "conflict" was unpopular. But oh, how we felt it. Now, these past three years the Nation is coming to its senses and recognising what you and your friends of great courage sacrificed. I knew you to be a man of sensitivity, of honour and full of a sense of responsibility. You went, you didn't have to go – a volunteer – a patriot who believed in your country and accepted the good and the difficult with that belief. I miss you now as much as I missed you then. Your death changed my life in a way I didn't even know until just recently. I will always hold you in a very special place in my heart. And you will grow old with me. For you were and always will be a part of my life and our memories do not dim with the passing of time. I have told some friends that this trip to Washington was a pilgrimage. I am coming here to honour you and the many who gave themselves for their family, friends

and country. We have loved you always and we respect the choices you made.

Perhaps someday we will meet again.

Fondest affections,

Angela

This third letter differs from the first two in subtle ways, though many similarities exist. First, the letter is more confused in its direction and understanding. Careful reading reveals that Joseph's conventional belief system is not necessarily matched by Angela's, as seen in the last line, which emphasises respect for the choices Joseph made. Second, in the other letters, the political context of the conflict is apparent, but not as obvious as in Angela's. In her letter, Angela's conflicted narrative, indicative of unresolved grief,⁵⁸ picks up a more defined line in this respect.

I do not believe that the conflicted social/ political context is absent from the other letters; the first few sentences of Carole's letter (Letter 2) are strongly resonant of a negative understanding of the war. She uses words like 'Murdered' and 'Tragedy' and questions whether she has done enough to change things? Cher (Letter 1) picks up on Chuck's feelings about the war being unjust and one feels that she has sympathy for that understanding. Angela (Letter 3), however, makes a clear reference to the political context and chooses to focus on the sacrifice not the perceived correctness of the conflict. Whilst these letters are all constructed by a particular politically and socially defined subgroup, it is one that needs to be acknowledged.

Plummer (1995), in his work on narrative empowerment, explores the symbolic interaction within stories from a socially constructed understanding, as would I. He suggests that all human behaviour is social, involving social interaction and the development of shared meaning. Seen in this light, the widows' stories are an example

⁵⁸ Parkes (1989: 90-92) addresses the bereaved journey as an access to a new identity.

of such symbolic interaction. Plummer sees this played out in three social groups of people: producers, coaxers and consumers. 'Producers' of stories tell the stories of their lives, in this case, the widows of soldiers lost in the Vietnam conflict as reported in letters to the dead. From this perspective the story can be taken as a selective reconstruction of a life, death and events that follow that life, rather than literal truth. The letters may not only be a representation of a life, an event or an experience but a creation in their own right. This approach helps to identify issues or events that are significant to an individual telling a story, such as, in the case of these letters, negotiating the experience of death and loss through continuing care and relationship with the lost loved one.

This approach is evidenced in both the similarities found in Angela's, Carole's and Cher's letters; in the sense of loss, unfairness, the need to identify meaning in shared pain, but also in the differences in emphasis, social position and understanding of the situation that resulted in the loss. This process is further complicated by the fact that all three women use a teleogenic plot, which is both therapeutic and a tool for communicating in a specific cultural setting. They each achieve this in very different ways. The first sentence in each of the three letters is cited in the present but immediately references the past. The use of this device allows each of the women to validate their love and continuing relationship with their deceased husbands through their own separate, post-mortem experiences and personal life journeys.

The 'coaxers' are provided by a wide variety of sources, such as social researchers, politicians, museum and collection directors but, controversially in the production of these letters, I argue that the Wall itself may play a very important function in this respect. The social action of leaving objects at the Wall, and its acceptability given the national importance of the Wall, provides a very safe and positive environment for the widows where they are respected and their pain is valued. In this sense, the Wall itself might be seen as a 'coaxer'.

Whilst the producers and the coaxes are both involved in the production of the stories, of equal importance are the 'consumers' of stories. Any interpretation must pay attention to the social location of the consumers, which in this case is extremely broad. The ability of individual consumers to construct differing meanings from the same story shows a potential weakness in this approach, particularly in relation to potential political manipulation; as later chapters will illustrate and as shown by the number of differing books about the objects left at the Wall. However, in terms of the women's letters this is arguably less important, as the narrative construct of all the letters actually relies on the flexibility to interpret individual loss and still identifies shared experiences common to all the widows.

All three of the women's letters have political aspects to them. Cher's anger at being 'ripped off' and the frequent use of 'they' reflect her unresolved loss but also her understanding of the process and reasons for her loss. Carole's anger is much more directed. She begins her letter referencing her husband as having been 'murdered'. Carole is clearly very angry at the lost years, and opportunities for life that have been lost, and again uses 'they' in terms of the Purple Heart Medal that Chuck got for dying.

As argued, Angela's letter is in some ways much more subdued but also more overtly political, within a subtle construct. The political emphasis about the government is much more about power. All three letters obliquely refer to external powers that controlled their husband's and their own destinies, but in a much more forceful sense they are taking back power themselves. By means of the teleogenic plot they are continuing an exploration of a continuing bond with their former husbands. This is an open and dynamic process that allows their stories to grow and develop both together and apart at a safe pace. This power is not least reflected in the action of depositing the letters in a public place, in public view. Their anger, pain and possibly guilt, are finding a voice.

Vietnam grief narratives, mostly written after the war, emphasise the silencing of grief, in effect, the denial of a voice. When the last U.S. troops pulled out of Vietnam, President Ford, reflecting public opinion, told the nation that they had to 'Forget Vietnam'. For many widows, the cost of that collective amnesia has been very high. This pressure to forget may not have been done in the interests of morale, but because the political climate was so divisive that to claim grief was to claim a shameful connection to the war. Once this imposed silence (repression) was broken by time, the post-Vietnam grief narratives such as Brandon's *Casualties*, Palmer's *Shrapnel of the Heart*, Laurent's *Grief Denied* and Spear Zacharias' *Hero Mama* contain a dominant motive in making public a grief that was silenced during the war and its immediate aftermath. Central to that motive is the absence of the body. Returning bodies were not seen; they were conveyed to a private burial ground or to Arlington National Cemetery, often in sealed and locked coffins (Acton, 2007: 80).

Even though the widows know where their husbands' bodies are, there remains an essential 'hidden' or 'lost' aspect to their relationships with their former partners. This is particularly noticeable in Cher's reference to visiting Chuck's grave and in Carole's need to touch her husband's name on the Wall. The essentially private experience of bereavement is shaped and controlled by public validation of some forms of behaviour and the erasing of others (Acton, 2007). This lack of anything physical in terms of remains finds expression in the material deposits at the Wall including letters.

During the Vietnam period, the private emotions of grief were shaped and constrained by the specific social climate and prevailing culture, as well as the general social norms surrounding mourning. Laurent (1999), in her autobiographical account of her widowhood resulting from the Vietnam conflict, repeatedly notes that American culture denies death and thus the individual's right to experience loss both privately and publically. In addition to such denial, the political context of protest in relation to the

Vietnam conflict left both family and friends unwilling to support or even be connected with the war. As both Zacharias and Laurent state, death experienced from this conflict remained a source of shame. Widdison and Salisbury support this concept '*American culture, coupled with the military experience, made the immediate experience of loss and grief resolution virtually impossible*' (Widdison & Salisbury, 1989-90: 295-6).

Following such a traumatic period, grief reactions are difficult to cope with and often only emerge years after the original event (Worden, 2009; Parkes, 1998). Acton suggests the writing of memoirs, memories, poems or letters and the collection of oral histories long after the Vietnam War is driven by a need to break the silence, legitimise the grief and establish some understanding of community (Acton, 2007: 81). I would suggest that the letters, particularly Angela's, reflect both a sense of confusion and the need to make sense of their experience and perhaps their own emerging identities. In this way the letters are as much constructs of the wives' personal histories and stories as their husbands.

Autobiographical writing is subject not to just self-revelation but also to self-making: the story informs who we are; people do not inform the story. When it comes to autobiography, narrative and identity are so intimately aligned that each constantly gravitates into the conceptual field of the other. Thus, rather than just a literary form, narrative is a mode of phenomenological and cognitive self-expression and self-experience, while the 'self' of autobiographical disclosure does not necessarily precede its constitution in narrative. It may well be that each individual constructs and lives 'a narrative' and that this narrative is the identity (Abbot, 2009). Therefore it is not that writing is autobiographical, but rather that people are living autobiography, performing it, and being shaped by what we have written in our daily lives. This facet is not singular, but finds its fulfilment in community; sharing memories with others is a prime social activity. Autobiographical writing is therefore a store of memories that can be shared and which forms a personal history and understanding of self. This writing not

only promotes engagement with the past but also, in my view, reconciliation, or at least a reinterpretation of that past. In this, it is teleogenic in nature, in that the women have shaped their current relationships, individually and in a sense collectively, by what they have written - not the other way round. This action finds an echo in all of the objects that are left at the Wall. These objects provide a shared history and tokens of pain and reconciliation. The fact that people may never know the individual stories is irrelevant to their use and action.

The vulnerability of this process of self-exploration and the evolving identity that the letters invoke raises an important issue about the act of delivery of these letters. Not least, in this, is the choice of a safe, significant and suitable site for their depositing. Reference to the Vietnam War Memorial's perceived sacred nature contained within current literature, is numerous; Scruggs,⁵⁹ Hass,⁶⁰ Murphy,⁶¹ and Lin⁶² all reference this fact. Professor Savage's new book on the history of the National Mall (Savage, 2009) is also instructive in this regard. He states:

'The monument core in Washington functions somewhat like a pilgrimage site, whose community of believers actually come together in the act of occupying a holy site, seeing a relic, re-enacting a sacred event. The rhetoric of civil religion-pilgrimage, holy ground, scared space – is often used to describe monumental Washington because it does seem to ring true' (Savage, 2009: 4).

It is the very special relationship between the American people and the Wall, based upon an understanding of its quasi-spiritual nature that allows it to be a meeting place between the living and the dead, and a safe place to deposit the letters.

⁵⁹ Scruggs & Swerdlow (1992).

⁶⁰ Hass (1998: 57).

⁶¹ Murphy (2007: 23, 146).

⁶² Lin (2000: 4-14).

Not all commentators would see the memorial in precisely these terms. Marita Sturken (1997) in her book on the U.S. politics and remembering deals with letters left at the Wall as part of a much broader argument. She sees the Wall's function in terms of a screen where interchange occurs in differing forms. Sturken suggests that the memorial is perceived by visitors as a site where they can speak to the dead (where, by implication, the dead are present) and to a particular audience – seen variously as the American public and the community of veterans. It is because of this process that the Wall is termed by many a '*living*' memorial. It is the only site in the Washington D.C. area that appears to be conducive to this kind of artefact ritual.

Many of the letters deposited are addressed not to the visitors but to the dead. They are messages to the dead and are intended to be shared as cultural memory. Often they reflect lives the dead were unable to live: one offers symbols of traditional life passages, such as a wedding bouquet, baby shoes, Christmas tree ornaments, and champagne glasses to 'celebrate your 25th wedding anniversary'; another is placed in a gold frame with the sonogram image of a prospective grandchild. The voices of the Vietnam War dead are also heard through their own words, as many families leave copies of letters written by soldiers, letters tinged with irony because they represent lives cut short.⁶³

Although Sturken's agenda is limited to politics and memory, she clearly identifies what happens at the Wall as an 'interchange' or 'progression'. In common with other commentators, she sees this as an act of memorialisation, yet in this passage there is an obvious link to a developing narrative construct and continuing relationship which is unavoidable, both in the nature of the objects left and in the purpose of their depositing. All of the authors cited in this paper would find common identity with the concept of a loss/progression/resolution aspect to the monument and the gifts left there. Most would identify this relationship as 'memorialisation' in nature. None have

⁶³ Examples taken from Sturken (1997: 78).

explored the relationship between the Wall, its objects and grief resolution as an expression of a *continuing* relationship; yet, as my analysis of the letters has revealed, this relationship is central to their content.

Summary

In depositing their letters at the Wall, the widows are required to take some obvious actions. In the first event, they must write the letter, then plan their trip, or 'pilgrimage' to the Wall. Once there, they have to engage in a process, or ritual, that allows the letter to be deposited or released. Through this process, the letter becomes a bereavement 'object', not just a means of communication. The Wall is a place where the living and the dead meet in a socially, political and spiritually important setting.⁶⁴ It sets a social permission to allow the widows to make themselves vulnerable in a positive and safe arena. It allows them both a collective and an individual voice or expression for their loss and pain which, in itself, is evidence of empowerment and the freedom to grieve.

The writing of the letter, the process of travel and ritual delivery and the depositing of the letter are an intrinsic part of the teleogenic plot, in that there is no chronological framing or artificially imposed 'termination' of grief. Rather the women's life experiences, their loss and pain, as well as the positive things they express are continuous. In this process, it might be argued that the women provide the content and then become part of the content of the letter, in a demanding, challenging and dynamic process. In effect, the letters become 'fulcrums' in the grieving process and in this they are strongly evident not of closure or completion of a relationship but of a continuing caring, loving and changing devotion; a continuing bond between widow and husband. Their delivery, in effect, becomes part of their construct.

⁶⁴ As shown in the popular images and paintings produced of the Wall. For a good example, see Teter's painting (Figure 6).

The narratives that people create for the dead in various arenas evolve with the living. Walter (Walter, 2009: 145), focusing on this subject, suggests that stories about the dead work best for mourners when shared, and when others construct similar or compatible stories. This insight can be applied to what happens at the Wall, in that what we see in the letters are three distinct but related actions focused upon an understood cultural setting. First, there is a re-writing of the relationship narrative. This is not to suggest that the contents and emotion expressed are false, but that the relationship between the dead husband and bereaved wife has changed and continues to change over time.

I would assert that the letters or notes are setting a personal story of grief, rejection and loss within a greater story of the Vietnam conflict. Carol Mithers contends of the Vietnam War that *'not only did the reasons offered for the U.S. involvement appear too flimsy to support the weight of so much pain and death, the day-to-day reality of the war itself seemed insane and out of control'* (cited In Acton, 2007: 12). Grief becomes contested where bereaved women are caught between the anti-war discourse of protest and the conventional ideology of sacrifice, without the offer of any meaning in the death.

Seen in this context, the letters are not an external meeting between dead soldiers and their wives but rather, as discussed earlier, a grief narrative that takes the form of a teleogenic plot within a shared culture of pilgrimage and 'gifting' of a significant object at the Wall, that seeks to recover and integrate the past and the present.⁶⁵ However, there is no 'closure' rather a reinterpretation of the past in light of the present. The narratives of the widows' lives and their relationships with their husbands continue; though there may be a temporary resolution or chapter endings that reflect the way continuing bonds change and develop over time.

⁶⁵ A point which the next chapter explores from a singular perspective.

CHAPTER FIVE

A Widow's Story: Laurent

Introduction

Pauline's story is drawn from her autobiography, *Grief Denied: A Vietnam Widows Story* (1999). It tells of her relationship with her husband, Howard, and his death in Vietnam, which was to define the rest of her life. Her story covers thirty years of often dysfunctional and conflicted grieving.⁶⁶ Her narrative, made up of linking passages connected to a skeleton of letters to her dead husband, provides a suitable case study of the experience of long-term grieving that finds some resolution, or at least understanding, in her eventual visit to the Wall to deposit the letters there some thirty years after her husband's death. In this it provides a fuller and more sustained evidence of the importance of narration and a sense of journey than we find in the other, single and more contained widows' letters from the last chapter. It does, however, clearly reference them and is unique to their conception and purpose, if not their structure. The letters offer a wider understanding of the use of narrative than the briefer single letters and are much more evident of the way bereaved people may use objects to represent fulcrums, or steps, in the experience of grief.

As we have seen in an earlier chapter, bereavement theory has evolved considerably in recent years. Gone is the reliance on prescriptive stage models of 'recovery' and a pre-emptive focus on emotional responses to loss, unrelated to cognition, action and

⁶⁶ In the extended acknowledgements at the beginning of her book Pauline writes, 'And to Howard, my husband, whose relentless love for me softened my heart and allowed me to fall in love with him'. Suggesting that she may not have originally loved him but now is in love with his memory, which is certainly significant of a continuing bond and a complex and renegotiated narrative.

identity (Niemeyer, 2007). In their place is a growing sensitivity to different patterns of adaptation as distinct functions of age, gender, culture and personal history. This pattern might be described as 'postmodern' (Walter, 1994), but actually finds its genesis in an understanding that is centred in the uniqueness of the individual and in direct relation to their loss. It is not that we all do it 'our' way, but rather that we respond to the cultural and historical settings around us in relation to those situations and people that have affected us, with due regard to our own grief journey and the person, or phenomenon, which we have lost. I would contend that Pauline's grief journey is a case in point.

This chapter will argue that Pauline's autobiography represents her grief in terms of the prescriptive stage models of the time, as documented in the progression of the letters in her book, though not necessarily deliberately or consciously.⁶⁷ It will further suggest that an inflexible and structured approach to grief reflecting the norms and pressures of the time can be seen throughout Pauline's writing, and has limited her ability to express her individuality and singular response to Howard's death. Instead, Pauline (possibly unconsciously) forms a reconstruction of her relationship with Howard over a period of 30 years, using her letters to him, and some significant objects, to both vent her pain and reconnect to him (possibly reconstruct him), and in that, also her hurt, loss, personal betrayal and sense of purpose (Parkes & Prigerson, 2010). This has been possible, I will argue, because of changes in society in terms of the Vietnam experience over that time, that have allowed a greater acceptance of individual diversity in grieving that no longer depends on achieving 'closure'.

Pauline contends throughout the book that society, her country, her family and she herself, have all conspired to deny her grief and prevent her from finding meaning in her loss; leading to decades of pain and unresolved loss. I will suggest that alongside this process she is continually forging, or trying to forge, a continuing bond with Howard in

⁶⁷ Email exchange between author and Laurent (23rd March 2010).

direct opposition to the implied denial, and that herein, her emotional conflict establishes its complexity (Valentine, 2008).

Pauline describes 30 years of painful and unresolved grief following her husband's death. Throughout this journey she gradually comes to understand that she needs to find a voice, and that she cannot completely 'release' her relationship to her husband but needs to acknowledge her loss and her continuing love for him, and allow it to change. She wants to let go of the pain, not of Howard, but cannot separate the two. This conflict is not resolved until her very last letter to him, which Pauline writes to be left at the Wall; this letter also acknowledges her own responsibility and empowerment.⁶⁸

In the opening section and final chapter of her book,⁶⁹ she acknowledges and describes her 'pilgrimage' to the Wall and her 'releasing' of a letter written to, and for, her dead husband, and perhaps herself. The letter is a classic example of all the elements of a teleogenic plot, and of a continuing post-mortem relationship with the person to whom it is written (Gunaratnam & Oliviere, 2009).

This chapter (forming the second part in the couplet on the Widows experience at the Wall) is based on Pauline's story, structured through her letters to her dead husband. It is a detailed exploration of a deep and long-standing bereavement from the Vietnam conflict, which extensively builds upon the letters from the last chapter. It shows how a teleogenic plot, as seen in this extended setting, sits within a holistic frame with other narrative forms including the construct of 'continuing bonds', which finds changing forms of expression throughout Pauline's story. The chapter will also make a detailed exploration of the letters as specific bereavement objects, which have their relationship to the other objects laid alongside them, and in relation to them, at the Wall.

⁶⁸ Laurent (1999: Chapters 1,4,5,6,7,10,11,12 & 14) all address this conflict.

⁶⁹ In itself, typical of a teleogenic narrative.

Discussion

Dear Howard:

It's Fall again, my favourite time of year, and it's the 30th anniversary of our marriage (a). This Fall is more beautiful than ever. I can finally see again – with the eyes of the women I used to be – the woman you married.

During the last five years, I've finally surrendered to my grief. I let it consume me, thaw my frozen heart, and teach me how to love again. The gifts of grieving have been many – the most precious being our granddaughter Alexis Madeline (b).

It seems natural to speak to you now after having been silent for so many years. In recent years I have spoken to you in anger, in despair and in doubt. Now I speak to you in love.

I begin by saying I'm sorry for holding you hostage for so many years. I'm sorry for blaming you and resenting you for the choices you made so many years ago. I'm sorry it took me so long to see the part I played in the drama of our lives.

I've blamed you, your parents, God, the Army and our Government for what happened to you in Vietnam (c).

I have kept myself chained to the God of my childhood in the same way, by blaming him for your death. The grooves of anger and resentment

were worn deep in my being. They've made wrinkles appear on my face. As I release them, I am regaining my youth.

*For years I hid the remnants of you under beds and in closets thinking I could "disappear" you from my life. Loosing you was the foundation upon which my life was built. That will never change. I no longer want it to **(d)**.*

Howard, thank you for planting that little seed in me before you went to war. You gave me something I could never have given myself... the experience of being a mother.

Being a mother taught me to love unconditionally and finally it taught me love's supreme lesson – how to let go of someone I love.

Thirty years ago when I marched down the aisle in a white dress on my father's arm, I felt pretty and innocent. When you died, I lost that innocence. In grieving, I've regained it. The breath that was knocked out of me when you died has returned.

It isn't easy to give up what has defined my life for so many years: Michelle, the grief, and you. I can no longer blame her or you for what life has given me.

Though my association with you was brief (only a few short years) it has been the cornerstone of my life. We don't belong to each other anymore in the way we used to. The ties that bound me to you – my anger and resentment – are gone. The other tie, Michelle, is grown and married with her own family.

What binds me to you now is the memory of the love we had for each other. It transcends time and space. It cannot be severed by death. The twinkle in your eye, that I often saw, was ignited by the love in your heart. I cherish that love, always will and I'll remember that when I think of you
(e).

I'll say "goodbye" now as I walk away from a life defined by your death to meet the life that awaits me round the next corner. Wish me luck, Howard.

Thanks for all you taught me and given me.

I love you.

Pauline

(Laurent, 1999: 227-229)

(a) As with all teleogenic plots and nearly all of the widows' letters that I have looked at, this begins in the present and is immediately thrown back into the past, in effect, 'looping' the narrative. Anniversaries are always a difficult time and significant indicators for this type of action (Parkes, 2009).

(b) A recovered relationship is evident here, which finds its focus both with Howard and with Alexis. Pauline is clearly operating 'out of chronological sequence' which is also characteristic of a teleogenic approach (Gunaratnam & Oliviere, 2009).

(c) All three sentences are clearly re-establishing a continued relationship, which may always have been present, but is now emerging and finding a voice. They are also very evident of Pauline's powerful need to continue to care for, and cherish, Howard.

Pauline's autobiography is focused on her relationship with her dead husband and how eventually she recovered that relationship. She feels that family, social, political and therapeutic pressure created a very strong cultural sense of protocol to 'release' Howard and 'let him go', to find 'closure' for herself. Effectively, her expression of grief and the need to acknowledge her love and her loss were completely denied to her. Doka (2002) suggests that this process might be described as 'disenfranchised grief':

'There is both an intersocial and intrapsychic aspect of disenfranchised grief. Disenfranchisement can occur when a society inhabits grief by establishing "grieving norms" that deign grief to persons deemed to have insignificant losses, insignificant relationships, or an insignificant capacity to grieve... there is an intrapsychic dimension as well. The bereaved may experience a deep sense of shame about the relationship, perhaps reflecting social norms. It is not just others who disenfranchise grief. The concept of disenfranchised grief is also particularly well suited to more complex societies. In less complex societies, deaths are marked communally, providing the opportunity for all members to express and experience grief' (Doka, 2002: Xiii).

(d) In the next sentence, Pauline both finds a linkage in time through her daughter back to Howard and into the future, and in that she finds the ability to 'let go' through the obvious concept of a teleogenic plot. The release is not from Howard but from the pain and negative consequences of the lack of acknowledgement of his death and his continued presence in her life. Pauline acknowledges this in the following sentence when she says, *'When you died I lost that Innocence. In grieving, I've regained it. The*

breath that was knocked out of me when you died has returned'. This narrative is even more significant as it was written thirty years after Howard's death.

(e) Pauline structures her passage about giving up, and finding some sort of closure from the anger and resentment of Howard's loss - not her relationship with, or her love for him. In her autobiography, Pauline makes clear that she has had a number of therapists and a psychiatrist caring for her and yet as late as the nineties the chosen model for her 'recovery' is the Kübler-Ross 'cycle of grief' (Laurent, 1999: 128). This model was initially developed through researching those facing their own death, not those who were bereaved. This conflict between strict stage models and Pauline's need to remain connected within the grief process goes some way to explain why she moves from a contradictory acknowledgement of loss to strongly reaffirming her relationship with Howard in a classical continuing bond (Klass *et al*, 1996). In this is her first acknowledgement of their shared love, which she describes in a teleogenic structure as a love that '*transcends time and space*'; a relationship which '*cannot be severed by death*'. The rest of this sentence continues to develop and reinforce that bond. Pauline is both 'letting go' of what she perceives as 'negative' in order to fit her therapeutic model, whilst at the same time developing a continuing and rediscovered relationship.

This sits in contrast to models that prescribe 'closure', but fits perfectly with the continuing bonding construct. It is interesting to note that, although she is clearly not familiar with Klass *et al* (1996) and the concept of continuing bonds, she makes a very clear reference to becoming aware later on in her narrative that there was a point where grief was no longer the issue. Rather, 'integrating' love and loss into her life was core, and essential to her mental health and future life. It was at this point that Pauline decides to make her first visit to the Wall and to deposit her letter there (Laurent, 1999: 204-205).

It is also worth noting that even at this early stage of Pauline's recognition of her need to re-bond, there is a clear and significant link to the objects of Howard's that she has now stored and significantly describes as *'remnants of you'*. She hides these under beds and in closets trying to make Howard *'disappear'* but always keeping hold and perhaps keeping hope, through the physicality of the objects. This behaviour is perhaps evidence of the duality that Pauline was expressing in her rejection of Howard's death and her longing to have him back that is typical of her simultaneous continuing bonding and releasing.

As I have suggested, Pauline uses the Kübler-Ross wheel of grief most significantly in that she claims throughout the book that she is unable to process the 'grief' part of the cycle, or more accurately, has been prevented from doing so. Her anger at both her husband's death, the political nature of the war and the army (for whom she worked) are evident, and Laurent structures that anger as a block of emotion in her book;

'When he graduated from the NCOC Academy, his parents came for the ceremony. I remember thinking as each candidate walked across the stage to receive his certificate and his orders for Vietnam, that they might as well be handing him a death certificate' (Laurent, 1999: 28).

I do not question her honesty in this memory but wonder if it has been coloured by the events that were to follow, a feature that is typical of the way autobiographical teleogenic narratives inform who we are and not the other way round (Abbott, 2009).

She turns her anger into a form of denial (her central theme and encompassing emotion) in the following pages and also starts her 'linking' activity in the writing of the letters to Howard. However, she herself perceives the letters as an extension of the denial of his death that she had still not, at that time, been informed of.

'Seeing the article in the paper was a premonition of his death. The minute I saw it I went into shock. I kept writing letters in a feeble attempt to keep him alive – to absolutely disregard the reality of his death.

On May 10th, the day he died, I wrote to him that the peace talks had begun in Paris. On May 12th, I wrote telling him that even though we had a house full of guests, I had spent two hours crying in my room because I was so worried. On May 13th, I wrote that the fighting had finished in Saigon. I was so relieved.

On the morning of May 15th I wrote my last letter to him. That evening they came to inform me of his death. It took the army five days to find me. After several days of unsuccessful attempts to locate me at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, they contacted Howard's parents who gave them my address and phone number. Didn't he fill out a form saying he wanted me to be notified first in the event of injury or death? Doesn't the Army know how to keep simple records?

The Army had terrorized him during his training, sent him away to war in a strange land, and now killed him. I developed a deep hatred for and desire for revenge on the Army, my government and my country' (Laurent, 1999: 35-36).

It is telling that Pauline constructs her loss on the Kübler-Ross cycle of grief and specifically picks out the themes of denial, negotiation, anger, acceptance and guilt as single and long drawn out periods of her life, as denoted by sections and chapters in the book.⁷⁰ I wonder if one of her therapists (she has a number of very different ones

⁷⁰ In her prescriptive 'stage' process Kübler-Ross uses the term 'depression' rather than 'guilt' (Kübler-Ross, 1994: Ch VI).

detailed in her book⁷¹) applied this model to help her structure her grief at a time when the emphasis in practitioner circles was on helping patients to move through their grief. In a larger sense, Pauline is operating in a period when the consensus in therapeutic and military circles was to 'let go of the deceased loved one in order to be able to move on in one's life', and so in some sense she would inevitably be influenced by the dominant cultural norm.

Pauline has clearly readily adopted the model to allow her, or perhaps motivate her, to engage with her grief in order to be able to eventually move on and engage more fully with her own life. I do wonder though if she has structured her behaviour at times, or her perceived memory of her behaviour, to fit the model rather than the other way around? It is almost as if her grieving, or what Pauline feels to be society's denial of that grief, needs to be forced or perhaps 'performed' to fit a perceived social norm. I will explore this possibility later in the chapter using some examples in Pauline's prose and letters.

Pauline is always forcing the issue of her grief. Her narrative reveals a number of failed relationships with other men, a difficult relationship with her daughter, a number of very different careers and relocations across America in what her text reveals are her battles against isolation. She is running from Howard's death, in a country which does not want to recognise her loss. I wonder if what she is really doing is seeking him, and trying to (forcefully) find meaning in her loss.⁷²

As we see in the development of her narrative, Pauline eventually deals with this 'imposed' isolation within her changing letter structure and content, using these as fulcrums to force her engagement with her loss (although I do not think she registers this at a conscious level); but possibly not of her continuing love for him and her clear, if

⁷¹ In her acknowledgments at the beginning of her book, Laurent thanks her current therapist who she has been seeing for six years at the time of writing.

⁷² Parkes (1998) looks at widows in London who face similar issues and Worden (2009) explores 'task' orientated recovery from grief, which may also be a function of Pauline's actions.

unstated, need to be in a relationship with him. She seems for many years, or even decades, unable to progress from the point of Howard's death and identifies this by the term 'denial'.

'When the funeral director told us that Howard's body was "non-viewable", my mother-in-law shrieked. Coming from such a quiet reserved woman, the shriek sent chills down my spine... I didn't have a name for it then, but denial was pretending that he would come back some day. My love affair with denial continued for many years. But pretending didn't make my grief go away – it just buried it deeper and deeper' (Laurent, 1999: 38-39).

This statement sets the structure for much of what was to follow in the narrative structure and content of Pauline's writing.

'Howard would be standing by my bed trying to wake me, when I woke up, he'd be gone. He would show up at my door and tell me that he had not died in Vietnam, but had been living in Europe with another woman. I don't remember when the nightmares began. I just remember not being able to fall asleep again after I had one' (Laurent, 1999: 41).

This behaviour sets a template that is then repeated seamlessly, with Pauline driving herself into inappropriate and manipulative relationships and jobs over a number of decades. This continues until a significant event triggers a change in her behaviour, forcing an engagement with her grief for Howard.

'I moved into the apartment two weeks later and in the process came across a box marked "Vietnam". The old familiar feelings arose – despair, regret and sorrow – feelings I had avoided for twenty five years. The box

was a reminder of a life that I struggled to forget but its contents haunted me.

I was taken back to the day in June 68 when a slip in my Mom's post office box indicated that there was a parcel waiting at the counter. When I got to the window, they handed me the box, which I carried several blocks to my parent's home. I was eight months pregnant.

As I opened it the first thing I noticed was the smell – it was a very distinct smell – a mouldy damp smell like the smell in the basement of my mother's house. I slowly explored the contents of the box.⁷³

All the letters and audio tapes he had received during his short two-month tour were in the box. Howard's wallet and everything in it was soaked, including the Sacred Heart Scapula given to him by his grandmother, Maria. His I.D.'s and photos were ruined. They told me he was crossing a bridge over a canal, assaulting a machine gun position when he died. I guess he was carrying his wallet. Maybe he fell into the canal. I tried to imagine the scene of his death, but nothing came. I just couldn't imagine it' (Laurent, 1999: 107).

These items form 'linking objects' that were with Howard when he died. As he died so have they, in the sense that they suffered damage in the final engagement that cost Howard his life. They provide a strong visual and physical presence in themselves for Pauline but also serve in a negative way, to distance her from the event of Howard's death. They objects were there with Howard, while she was excluded.⁷⁴

⁷³ Duery Felton, the Curator of the MARS Federal collection of the objects left at the Wall, describes having the same experience when he opens packages of objects recovered from Vietnamese battlefields (private conversation with the Author, January 2010).

⁷⁴ For a fuller exploration of 'linking objects' see Volkan (1981).

'I picked up a small box. When I opened it, his wedding ring came tumbling out and landed on the gold sculptured carpet of my Mom's living room. My heart sank. In that moment his death was confirmed. He wouldn't have let anyone have his wedding ring unless he were dead' (Laurent, 1999: 107 continued).

The object confirms death. It is interesting that it was their wedding ring, the single most intimate object that, by its physical nature (an unbroken circle, blessed by a Roman Catholic Priest), signifies both the brutality of Pauline's loss against the promise of a shared eternity.⁷⁵

'I felt disgusted, the kind that comes with untimely death. These mouldy remnants of a life that used to be were all I had left. There were military orders, socks, shoes, and underwear. And of course there was the administration guarantee he received in the Army; it promised him an administrative job' (Laurent, 1999: 107 continued).

She lists utilitarian objects, pathetically identifying Howard and his presence and then responds with obvious anger in contrasting them with Howard's promise, which could never be honoured.

'I didn't know where his dog tags were, they weren't in the box. Maybe they were in the coffin. I couldn't sit with this box for very long. I was so angry with the Army and my country for sending him to die in an undeclared war' (Laurent, 1999: 107 continued).

Personal identification markers (Dog Tags) were very personal items and it is not surprising that Pauline is looking for them. U.S. servicemen were issued with two. One

⁷⁵ Allen (1995) and the staff at the MARS Federal archive confirm the presence of a large number of wedding rings left at the Wall, almost without exception these are left anonymously.

was worn around the neck and the second around the external neck of the left boot in case of decapitation (Zaffiri, 1989). They were frequently the only way that personal identity could be established in traumatic deaths.

Vietnam often reduced personal identity of soldiers to a corporate whole, which arguably allowed situations like My Lai to develop (Greiner, 2009). Dog tags, in that environment, formed an essential link between the soldiers and their home and families. The tags were never removed from a living soldier and never returned with a dead one. Significantly they are the single most deposited item left at the Wall (Allen, 1995: 148, 241). It is evident therefore that Pauline's search for Howard's tags is indicative of her search for a reconnection with him.

'I taped the box shut and kept it hidden under the beds, in the back of the closets, away from view in the same way I kept all the feelings associated with this box hidden. Each time I moved, which was often, I'd come across the box. I'd look at it momentarily and then quickly shove it into the next hiding place. I dared not venture into the box for fear it would swallow me up. With each move, the avoidance became stronger' (Laurent, 1999: 107 continued).

Pauline is engaging with a shadow game. The box itself is an object and has, in this context, become a significant linking object in its own right. It owes that position to what it carries of Howard's personal possessions within it. However, as Kavanagh (2000) has shown us, objects only have the identity that we as individuals, or collectively, invest them with, even if that has a negative connotation where the object becomes a hidden or 'shadow' repository for memory and emotion.⁷⁶

In an exchange of emails with Professor Jenny Hockey about this subject, Hockey writes:

⁷⁶ Although she does not use the term 'shadow', much of Margret Gibson's (2008) book explores this complicated relationship between object and grief.

'the potency of material objects as suppliers of unwelcome memories exposes the shadow side of their domesticated role as malleable resources for more deliberate acts of memory making. Chapter 5 (Hallam & Hockey, 2001) is very much about this 'shadow side' of memory objects - and the items you are concerned with, the letters left at the wall, may well fall outside this shadow side (we address them in the chapter on death writing which argues that 'sensations of proximity to deceased relatives and friends are often achieved... through the written word' (Hallam & Hockey, 2001: 175). So what we're talking about in our work is the agency of memory (objects), their capacity to trouble as well as comfort us. My all-time favourite quote from Sheringham, whose work inspired this chapter, is "the inassimilable past lodges in the present like a foreign body" - in other words, not all memories can be domesticated, or integrated into the present as dimensions of ongoing relationships with the dead'.⁷⁷

This may well be true at least in part, but as the next paragraphs show even 'shadow' objects can, and frequently do, take on transformative functions in the grieving process.

'I didn't know it then, but the box contained the items I needed to help me heal. As courageous as I was in all other aspects of my life, I avoided this box and the grief it contained at all costs. I kept trying to put it behind me as President Ford had advised veterans to do.⁷⁸ But shoving that box and my feelings away year after year only postponed my life, it didn't further it' (Laurent, 1999: 107).

⁷⁷ Email exchange between Professor J Hockey and Author (10th June 2010).

⁷⁸ Pauline is referring to a speech delivered by President Ford at Tulane University, New Orleans, April 25th 1975 where he told Americans that the Vietnam war was over for the U.S and that they should now forget it. South Vietnamese forces were still engaged in battle with the North when he spoke. Saigon fell to the North five days later, ending the war.

Eventually Pauline needs to remove the box to avoid seeing it; she gives it to her daughter to keep. This is a deeply revealing paragraph, which exposes Pauline's ongoing need to deny her pain and loss. There is much in what she says about the pressures that were placed upon her to 'move on', as we will see in other chapters, including strongly political ones. Nonetheless, what Pauline does not acknowledge is her own responsibility in prescribing how she feels or, more accurately, thinks that she should feel, and how she has responded to Howard's death.

It is significant in what, by this stage, I would suggest, had become a very difficult and complex grieving process for Pauline (Worden, 2009: 127-146); that it is Vietnam-related objects associated with Howard's death that has enabled both an engagement with her loss but also the motivation to change. When exploring the psychological or therapeutic association between object and person we need to be aware that extremes of grief bring a sharper focus to this understanding. Within this context an object offers a neutral means of 'carrying' or 'representing' what otherwise might be impossible to bear or vocalise. The object's neutrality exists in as much as it is completely at the individual disposal of the user (Schaverien, 1997). As explored in the previous 'bereavement' chapter, which establishes the neutrality of the object subject to personal interpretation (Kavanagh, 2000), or infliction (Pearce, 1994).

Pauline is not alone in this; Sturken (1997) describes the depositing of objects at the Wall as an 'act of catharsis, a release of long-held memory' (1997: 78). Sturken shares what is a common but somewhat limited view. Most of the commentators on the objects left at the Wall would agree with this process but, significantly, have not researched bereavement models or theories in relation to what happens at the Wall. Even Hass, who dedicates her book to this subject, does not offer a single bereavement model or reference in her bibliography to substantiate her assumptions (Hass, 1998).

'Denial was a powerful defence mechanism that had helped me survive for many years. But it was no longer useful to me. As I looked deeper at the depth of despair and pain in my life. I found the strength to face it. I asked my daughter to return the box labelled 'Vietnam'. I knew that I had to open it and look inside. I had to face those feelings' (Laurent, 1999: 121).

Pauline obviously sees this action as engaging with her grief as opposed to ignoring or repressing it. Once again, by using the objects and rejecting her 'denial', Pauline is facing her pain and loss but is also enacting a continuing bond with Howard through his intimate possessions. In a clear duality (the items show both the presence and the absence of Howard), the items are a bridge to Howard himself and to his death. Pauline is forcing herself to admit her loss and pain by enduring Howard's death and equally painfully creating a new relationship or bond with him. Pauline never uses the term, but throughout her book and most frequently in her letters, there is this same obvious paradox in her desire to both hide, or let go, and simultaneously needing to reconnect.

The next letter provides a very good example of this process, again revealing Pauline's use of extremes in her writing to try to engender change in herself.

'Dear Howard,

For twenty-five years I've been dreaming that you'd be coming back. When you did, I wanted to be available to resume where we left off, to discuss our new baby girl, to begin our journey of marriage together. We had so little time to learn about marriage. It got cut short way too soon. I'm beginning to see that I must finally say goodbye. I can't wait for you any longer.

As I finally cry these tears which have been bottled up for so long, I am regaining that 22-year-old maiden that you married. She died when you died. I want her back into my life. In order to get her back, I must experience the grief. I am strong enough now to feel the terror of your death – open your coffin and look in. I couldn't do it back in 68' (Laurent, 1999: 127).

A clear paradox is evident here between trying to resolve her painful grief and to safely reconnect to Howard. It is evidenced when Pauline says goodbye and then immediately continues her relationship in written conversation. She is sending herself back in time, trying to be the person who had not yet suffered. By using a teleogenic grief plot, rolling down through time and backwards again, she has been able to revisit key experiences and negotiate her story in new ways.⁷⁹ This process promotes the development of therapeutic relationships which offer new ideas and understandings not recognised by the norms and beliefs surrounding grief at that time. It also allows the widow to re-examine her position in the narrative, from outside of her own story, and this is exactly what Pauline does, using both the letters and other objects in the process.

'Howard, do you think I'll ever get over you and be normal? I don't. I think the loss of you defined my life' (Laurent, 1999: 127 continued).

This sentence following on from the previous paragraph is a case in point. Using the teleogenic narrative allows Pauline to be contradictory and yet to continue her conversation. She has just said goodbye and is seeking her time before Howard's loss and now recognises that his death has formed and defined her whole adult existence since then. Her story is less 'contradictory' than 'seamless'. There is a deep connection between wanting to be young when she was not hurt and had not wasted half her life

⁷⁹ Paley (2009: 17-32) spends considerable time addressing this issue.

(as she sees it) and acknowledging that this happened because she loved him and still needs to acknowledge that love.

This finds its evidence in the next paragraph.

'I've been unable to love as I loved you, afraid to be that open and vulnerable again. You had such a special place in my heart and I haven't been willing to let anyone else in there.

I've been afraid I'd betray you by loving another. I said "until death do us part" but I never accepted that death had parted us.

As I read your letters one by one, I'm beginning to say goodbye and realize you won't be knocking on my door sometime as you've done a thousand times in my dreams. I'm beginning to be able to say goodbye.

A week later I took the two audio tapes Howard had sent me from Vietnam and went for a walk in Armstrong Woods, a nearby redwood forest. I got all dressed up for the rendezvous with Howard – put on a nice outfit, made up my face and styled my hair. I strapped my portable tape player around my waist and headed out to meet Howard' (Laurent, 1999: 127 continued).

Pauline is 'functioning' her continuing bond, dressing up for Howard. She is using her clothes (objects) to simulate a 'date' or 'meeting' with Howard even if that meeting will be set during a separation and via a tape which, both during the war, and now, bridges their divide.

Unruh (1983), as we have seen in previous chapters, suggests that before they die people interpret and apportion cues to their personal identities for those who will survive. Conversely, survivors are left with images, materials, objects, and wishes of the deceased which must be sorted and selectively preserved. What is significant here is that Unruh, almost uniquely, is suggesting a continuing bonding process, which is an extended relationship between the living and the dead mediated by personal narrative (story), recollection and objects. It sets grief into a socially connected material perspective with direct relevance to my own research at the Wall. He is promoting action-ing or as I would describe it ‘fulcrum-ing’ one’s grief within this matrix. I suggest that this is precisely what Pauline is doing here.

Following this episode comes one of the most painful, and perhaps controversial, moments in Pauline’s formal correspondence with (not to) her husband.

‘A few days later I came home from a long evening of meditation in which anger towards Howard surfaced for the first time.⁸⁰ I was finally leaving denial and moving into the next stage of grief – anger’ (Laurent, 1999: 125).

I asked Laurent in an email⁸¹ why she had structured her grief journey along the Kübler-Ross model. She replied that she had not consciously done so. Yet Kübler-Ross (1995: 33-72) explicitly states in her book that anger prescriptively follows ‘denial’ as it does in Pauline’s narrative.⁸² I believe that this almost prescribed rationale may be a result of the cultural norm shaping Pauline’s actions and decisions.

‘I darkened the room, lit two white candles and after rummaging through my closet, found Howard’s Army hat which I placed between two candles.

⁸⁰ As we have seen already, not strictly accurate.

⁸¹ Email exchange between Laurent and Author (23rd March 2010).

⁸² Later in her career, Kübler-Ross recognised that her model needed to be much more flexible and dynamic.

For the first time ever, I began expressing my anger towards my fallen war hero. I sobbed as I beat the floor with my fist finally letting my rage out' (Laurent, 1999: 128-129).

This raises very significant questions. Given the importance Pauline places on the objects in the box, Howard's service cap is found just 'laying' in a closet after all those moves. Pauline loathes the army and has said that Howard's things needed to be locked away and yet here is his service hat ready to be utilised.

Pauline needs the objects, candles and hat, to reconnect. She also needs the quasi-religious ritualism to enable the overall context of the event to provide structure or a familiar platform. There is a conflicted narrative or perhaps a conflicted zone within this text or Pauline herself. It reads like a badly written play. This section is difficult and I wonder if Pauline has used these precious objects before without the drama that is to follow in the letter she narrates to Howard?

'Thanks for coming to visit tonight, Howard. I'm not quite as afraid to talk to you as I used to be. I need to tell you how I'm feeling tonight. I'm tired of glorifying your death – glorifying you as a war hero. I need to tell the truth about your death – about what it was like to have you get on a jet plane one day and never come back' (Laurent, 1999: 128-129 continued).

Pauline opens with a 'Thank you' to Howard for coming to visit her, which suggests that he is experienced as external and real, not as part of her internal life. This contrasts with the rest of her book which is entirely based on the Freudian premise of needing to work through one's grief in order to be able to eventually 'release' Howard from her life. It is this contested zone of needing to release Howard and her obvious need to reconnect to him that finds its resolution in a continuing bond that, I would argue, requires a form of functioning.

Both Niemeyer (2007) and Worden (2009), in different contexts, talk about the need to 'function' or 'action' grief, and Unruh (1983) structures his paper on this subject through both personal narrative and object function. I believe that Pauline is attempting to do this via a prescribed route or model, rather than finding a personal way to engage her grief and relationship with her husband, and that this is why her text here seems forced and unnatural.

'You weren't here to hold my hand and comfort me when I was in labour. God damn it. And you weren't here to celebrate the new being I had brought into the world. The beautiful gorgeous baby that was perfect. You weren't here to share the joy, God damn you, God damn you! I've been protecting you for too long. You don't get mad at a war hero. You pretend he's great and he never did anything wrong. But you suffer inside when you do that' (Laurent, 1999: 128-129 continued).

I wonder if this section is subconsciously staged to fit a perceived process mandated upon fixed societal expectations. The use of language here is difficult and different from the rest of the narrative; it seems manufactured. It certainly does not sit comfortably with the use of syntax in the rest of the book. It might be assumed that this is due to the emotional content of the letter and situation, but in reality the whole book is emotionally charged with significant incidents.

'You had no business crossing that bridge and shooting bullets and having bullets shot at you. That's not who you were. Why didn't you recognise that, God damn it' (Laurent, 1999: 128-129 continued).

Again, there is a conflict in the narrative here. Howard was a 'Specialist Senior Battle Trained NCO', who had attended 'Officer Training Course'. This was exactly who he was, although, significantly, it may not have been who Pauline wanted him to be.

'Some day your daughter will have to do all this grieving also. She's going to be angry with you too. I hope she doesn't wait twenty five years to have this conversation with you, as I have because in twenty five years a lot of her life will be lost, just as a lot of mine has been lost' (Laurent, 1999: 128-129 continued).

Pauline's daughter was twenty-five at the time of writing and was not born until after her father's death. I therefore wonder if Pauline has slipped back in time here? This would be compatible with a therapeutic written narrative and the use of powerful death related objects. I also note that Pauline had just returned from meditation so was perhaps mentally prepared to face her ghosts, in a very constructive and deliberate way.

'When I asked Michelle to bring the box labelled "Vietnam" back to me, I knew I was dragging your dead body back into my life, I'm much stronger now. I can deal with your dead body. When I was twenty two years old and seven months pregnant, I couldn't. I'm finally accepting your death. I know that you are not going to knock on my door and say that you're living somewhere else. I won't be able to convince you to come back to me. You aren't going to do that. You're gone. The empty space in my life will always be here and I have to quit pretending otherwise. You aren't coming home. You really did die.

Thanks, Howie for listening' (Laurent, 1999: 128-129 continued).

This paragraph seems to argue against my thesis of reconnection and continuing bonds and narrative. I would argue that it is, in fact, complementary. Pauline has an obvious need to face the loss of Howard and deal openly with her emotions about that loss. Her letters, throughout the book, reflect a duality (supported by the linking text) which finds focus in both this (forced) connection with Howard's death, and a very obvious but

perhaps subconscious reconnection with the man she loves. She is prevented from the latter until she has engaged with the former. Or, more accurately, she needs to process this emotional relationship between these two seemingly opposite emotional states, together.

Pauline is managing her relationship in a postmodern society (Walter, 1994) in the United States, in which Veteran support groups promote a dignified and emotionally restrained expression of grief (Schulzinger, 2006). However, Pauline finds another outlet through expressing her story in a written narrative, both in terms of her letters and her book that contains them. This autobiographical narrative is marked by a series of contradictions, which are strongly evident of a natural teleogenic plot (Gunaratnam & Oliviere, 2009; Abbott, 2009). Married to this, the letters are objects within themselves and, wedded to the other significant objects used in her book, they provide the motivation, the focus and the 'fulcrum' to enable Pauline's personal 'story' and life to move forward.

The following letter to Howard shows how this process has moved Pauline on and enabled her to find new routes (and the courage) to investigate her husband's death and journey home, in order to both answer some questions but also to reconnect with him, almost to journey home with him and reaffirm the bond with his death which significantly promotes the bond with his life. There is here a very tender reconnection: Pauline is perhaps caring for Howard in a way she could not do at the time of his death.

'Howard:

I finally received your personal deceased file. I held my breath as I opened it. I scanned the pages trying to find out how badly your body was damaged. I'm only able to read bits at a time. Once a month, I take it out and read some more I always see something that I haven't seen before.

Today I took a big step and called a man who worked at the mortuary at Saigon. He knew what all these words meant that were used in your personal deceased file. He assured me your body was whole and complete and that the reason your casket was marked "non-viewable" was because your body had started to deteriorate. He said that even if you were left out for a couple of hours, because of the intense heat in Vietnam, deterioration would occur. He kept trying to assure me that your body was whole. He was very helpful and answered any and all questions I had. I wondered how he could still be sane after working in the mortuary in Saigon for four years.

He told me that your body was shipped to Travis Air Force Base and then to Oakland Air Force Base where it was prepared for burial. I didn't know that. I assumed that it came from Vietnam to St Louis. How long was your body in Oakland? I don't know. What did they do to you there? I don't know. It is hard for me to let go of your body. I want to know that it was treated with respect.

He said that maybe I was better off that I didn't view your body because if I had done that, the memory I'd be left with would be that of a dead soldier instead of the man that I knew and loved. But Howard, I wanted to see what war had done to your body. I'm tired of being protected. I want the truth. I want to see it close up like your comrades did. It has taken me twenty-seven years to be able to ask these questions. Having this conversation about your body is important in order for me to accept the reality of your death' (Laurent, 1999: 152).

It is significant that Pauline uses the term 'conversation' – she is talking to Howard and acknowledging that this is a dynamic and in some ways, reciprocal process. She may not 'hear' Howard's voice but from his history, documents and personal items she is in relation or 're-bonding' with him. Pauline is not alone in this process. Acton (2007) describes continued problems with grieving for veterans' families with the bodies returning from Vietnam. She suggests that most of the caskets were sealed and if interred at Arlington National Cemetery the bodies of the dead were never viewed. When viewed together with the MIA issue⁸³ this forms an important function of the Wall in allowing or even promoting this reconnection, which Pauline is in the process of forming here.

Pauline's conversation with Howard is also alluded to in other parts of the book:

'When we visited Uncle John the previous spring, Michelle had told him about what her dad had said on one of the audio tapes he sent home from Vietnam – that he was planning to buy a teddy bear for her, but had decided to wait until his next pay check. She expressed her disappointment at not getting that teddy bear. Uncle John sent her a teddy bear for her birthday. Along with it, he had this note,

"I know this teddy bear can't compare to the one you would have received from your dad, but when I heard you talking about the bear you never got from your dad, I had to go out and buy you one. Your dad would have been so proud of you."

It seemed as if Howard was whispering both in my ear and his brother's asking us to give these gifts to Michelle on his behalf. The book and the

⁸³ Covered in depth in other chapters.

teddy bear occupy very special places in her heart and in her home'
(Laurent, 1999: 180).

Pauline is open here about Michelle's special object but whilst she makes it clear that her dead husband's Vietnam objects helped her long term recovery from grief-related clinical depression, she is very careful not to reveal too much detail about the nature of these objects. The box and its contents become key to negotiating the author's loss and re-establishing a relationship with her dead husband and her developing relationship with her daughter. But, even given the frankness that Pauline displays in her book, in her openness about the gifts she leaves at the Wall, she is very protective about some of the contents of the box.

This is indicative of the very powerful effect that cherished objects can have. Even when objects are a structured part of a grief narrative and formative in a continuing bonding process, the raw power of an object may remain a refuge for privacy and a bridge to intimacy (Woodward, 2007), that should not be shared too readily.

This contrasts sharply with Pauline's public visit, 'pilgrimage' as she titles it, to the Wall on Veterans Day:

'Eugene Cash began the day with a poem about a son who had died in the war. I was crying immediately. By the end of the day, I realised the completion of my grief was not really the issue. In grieving, I had opened my heart and with an open heart and I was feeling more than I had ever felt before. Almost everything moved me to tears' (Laurent, 1999: 204).

This is a very telling paragraph. Without knowing about continuing bonds theory⁸⁴ Pauline has come to a point where she is instinctively acknowledging the continuing presence of Howard in her life, her relationships and her grief.

Pauline's planning for her visit to the Wall focused on her fiftieth birthday.

'I allowed myself to stop being so busy and began to gather the items to take to Washington for Howard. Charlie told me that visitors to the Wall leave mementoes. I knew immediately what I wanted to leave – the little pink dress which my mother had brought for Michelle to wear home from hospital. I asked Michelle if she minded. She didn't.

I decided I would leave the dress on a doll so I began to search for a used baby doll. A friend told me of a couple of shops that sold used children's toys, but I didn't find anything that suited me.

A recurring thought kept coming to me – go to your favourite Salvation Army store – you'll find the doll there. I ignored the message for about a week. When I finally went, sure enough, there was the perfect doll lying right on top of the stack of used toys. I picked her up and headed to the check-out counter. Everything was on sale that day for 50% off so I only paid \$1.25 for her.

I brought her home and cut her hair. As I did, I imbued her with a personality. She joined the two bears in sleeping with me every night. I kept telling her not to get too attached to living with us because she was going to be at the Wall for Veterans Day weekend and then she would be stored in a warehouse with all the other artefacts that are left.

⁸⁴ Email exchange between Laurent and Author (23rd March 2010).

Within a few days I had fallen in love with this little, used doll. When I found her, I think she reminded me of the Wild Child in my dreams who was dirty, unkempt and needed some tender loving care. My heart broke right open when I thought about leaving her behind at the Wall. I told my therapist about it and she said,

“Maybe you shouldn’t leave her. It sounds to me like she’s special and maybe you should keep her”.

“She is special, but she has to sacrifice herself as part of the ritual. It’s her destiny – that’s why I brought her”. As I spoke these words it occurred to me that I was about to sacrifice the doll as I had sacrificed myself so many times before. I couldn’t do it.

My decision not to leave the doll at the Wall was a turning point in my life. I felt certain, even then, that if I ever loved again, it wouldn’t be at the expense of myself’ (Laurent, 1999: 210).

Left at the Wall or not, the significance remains! When I first read this passage I asked myself why an old doll? I think that Pauline, perhaps subconsciously, may have planned for this to happen. She chose to find an object that she could emotionally attach to and invest in. She took the doll to be with her, the most intimate part of her home and life - her bed. She cared tenderly for it and dressed it in her baby daughter’s hospital dress. She invested something essential of herself, her history and her daughter (made with Howard) into the object that she was leaving for Howard.

The doll was not only a linking and Talismanic object; Pauline was sacrificing something of herself at the Wall. In this I extend the work of authors such as Hallam, Hockey and

Hass who describe such objects as functions of either mementoes or a means of release. In Pauline's case, the objects can be seen as a functional subject that fulcrums the grieving process. Rather than a 'linking object' in psychoanalytical terms, they form part of a fluid and safe dynamic (you cannot really hurt an object) that allows and promotes a safe re-attachment and reconnection to the object of loss. Certainly the staff at MARS experience (and treat) the objects they receive for storage within this instinctive understanding.⁸⁵

'Michelle brought a photo of her dad when he was five years old and another photo of herself at the same age. The resemblance was striking. She photocopied the two images to leave at the wall for her dad.

As soon as we got on the plane, Michelle started wiping tears from her cheeks. She said that each time she looked at the gift I was carrying for Howard, she cried. It was a stick I had found in the woods, to which I had attached an Oak leaf, some feathers of a bird who had sacrificed its life and some beads I had made. Attached to the stick was the following poem by Rumi, a 13th century Sufi poet:

"The minute I heard my first love story, I started looking for you, not knowing how blind I was. Lovers don't finally meet each other someday, they're in each other all along" (Laurent, 1999: 211).

The unique gift from Pauline for Howard is not unusual. Allen's (1995) book reveals many such 'natural' offerings at the Wall⁸⁶ (note Pauline's use of the word 'sacrifice' again). It is clear that the offering touched both Pauline and her daughter deeply but would not perhaps have meant as much to Howard who was a practicing Roman

⁸⁵ All of the Staff I interviewed at the MARS Federal repository agreed that they saw the objects they received in this light.

⁸⁶ Such items often reflect indigenous Native American beliefs and culture.

Catholic at the time of his death. This is significant in terms of both a continuing relationship that focuses on Pauline's and Michelle's developing and changing relationship to Howard and 'continuing bonding activity' (Unruh, 1983). These significant objects are not mementoes or 'remains' of personal items but contemporary creations significantly used to forge a gift and connection with Howard. They are not preparing to say 'goodbye', but 'I love you'.

'That morning I made my way to Howard's panel and laid down my offerings; my letter to him, Michelle's baby dress, a photo of Michelle and me on our wedding day, a poem I had written, and the stick with the feathers, the beads and the Rumi poem.

Charlie introduced Michelle and me to many people that day; Volunteers, veterans, and other widows. They all treated me like I was royalty, never before had I ever been treated with such respect and admiration as I was that day at the wall.

We helped Sandy do a rubbing of her father's name which was so high up that she needed a ladder. Charlie and I held the ladder, as she climbed up to the top so that she could reach her dad's name. She recently found out that she was pregnant, so she left a card for her father congratulating him on being a granddad' (Laurent, 1999: 220).

This is evidence again of a previously unrecognised, continuing bond. Significantly this is the first time that Pauline feels that she has the public support and recognition that she deserves for suffering the loss of her husband in a politically and socially divisive war. Stanley Stylianios and Mary Vachon (2006) have researched the importance of social support, networking, respect and friendship in bereavement. They suggest these support functions, in terms of social adaption for widows in particular, are essential in

the grieving process. Pauline had no such support after Howard died until joining the Veteran support groups some twenty five years later.

'When Charlie hugged me goodbye, my heart broke wide open. I told Charlie and Ann it felt like Howard had come home to me. He came home in each of the people I met. Although I didn't have him in the flesh, I had a sense of homecoming – a release that one feels when one is finally home safe, after a long difficult journey.

Maybe it was me who came home that weekend. Maybe I finally came home to myself. I felt a sense of wholeness which I've never felt before. Something was different. I wasn't quite sure what. Maybe I had somehow finally recovered all those pieces of myself that had split apart when Howard died. I had survived a clinical depression and a journey through my grief – I had a lot to be thankful for' (Laurent, 1999: 222-223).

Couplet Summary

The bereavement and loss events evident in all the letters that Pauline wrote to Howard are clearly compounded by the political and social implications of the Vietnam conflict. This process is shared in Cher's letter in her continued use of the term 'they' in attributing blame for Chuck's death and her longer term compounded loss.

Carole Ann's anger, in her letter in the preceding chapter, at the circumstances of her loss is very evident in her use of language and her derision of her country's oldest decoration, and we find a similar approach from Angela.

The letters all reflect a social and political context, which is inextricably linked to the women's grief. The social and cultural complexities of the women's grief define the route they take in attempting to find meaning in their loss, which for all of them finds some fulfilment at the Wall.

The sense of loss and uncertainty, coupled with anger is clear in all the widows' letters, but most clearly expressed in Pauline's, where she openly speaks of blaming '*God, the Army and our Government for what happened to you in Vietnam*'.

Both Pauline's letter and her autobiography as a whole, reflect her inability to articulate her grief due to the complexity of American society's reaction to the conflict, coupled with the shame of service in Vietnam. President Ford told his nation that it needed to 'forget Vietnam'; no wonder then that these women have shown anger and a sense of repression in their grief. The need to address their loss and recover a relationship to, and with, their dead husbands is complex but clearly important to them.

All the women have been aided by a material structure in making sense of their loss, the Wall providing both a stimulus to writing and a repository for their letters, as well as a meeting place with their dead husbands, and other grieving widows. Supported by the open, but positive composition of the teleogenic plot with the structure and content of their letters, the women have subconsciously and materially adopted an approach, which sequences and functions their developing continuing bonds.

'When I got home from my field trip to the Wall, I threw away the old mouldy, cardboard box labelled "Vietnam" I took the contents and put them in a clean, new, white plastic crate which sits right in the open in the room where I write. I don't have to hide the remnants of Howard anymore. Exploring the contents of the box gave my feelings expression

relieved me physically and psychically of the grief I carried for years' (Laurent, 1999: 223).

'My own personal denial of Howard's death was compounded by my country's denial. We all pretended that Vietnam was behind us but in the silence the war's impact continued to deepen' (Laurent, 1999: 125-126).

'...“why are you doing this?” I didn't have an answer. I just felt compelled to follow the urge to continue telling my story. I'd finally given voice to the young war widow and she wanted to tell her story over and over again' (Laurent, 1999: 134).



Figure 6: Lee Teter's 'The Wall' (Vietnam Veterans' Memorial)

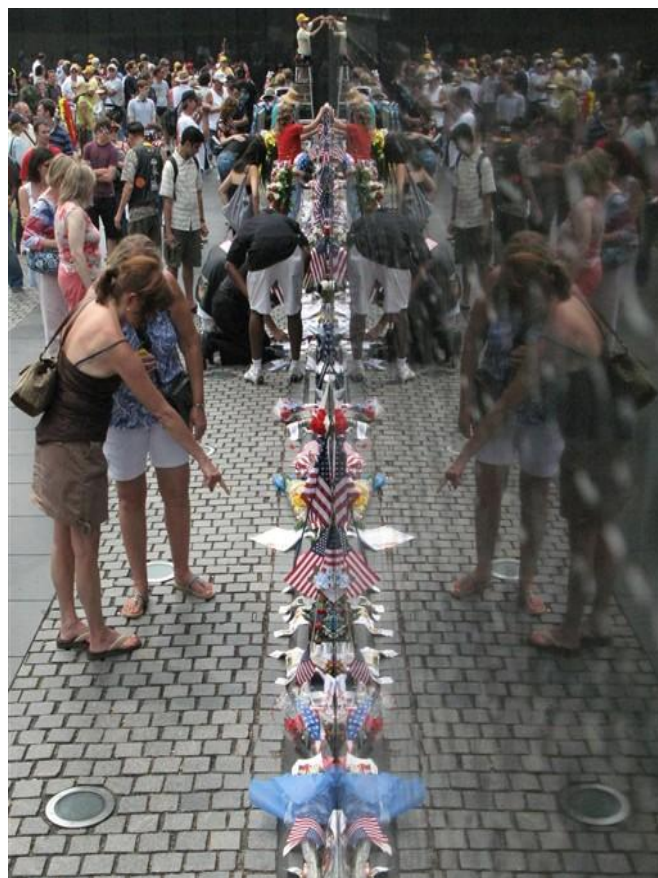


Figure 7:
The Wall with Counsellors in the Background



Figure 8: Narrative Objects left at the Wall



Figure 9: Mothers and Wives Day

CHAPTER SIX

Veterans at the Wall

This chapter, the first of a couplet, explores the phenomenon of Vietnam Veterans using the Wall, and the objects that they place there. It will seek to demonstrate a linkage between veterans and the Wall which will describe the initial evidence of grief and loss in this specific group. It will utilise a large volume of work from authors such as Schulzinger, Scruggs, Breende, Jeffreys-Jones and Ashplant who have all, from different perspectives, explored the political and personal consequences of Vietnam Veterans post-war and with reference to the Wall.

This work will then seek to describe how specific grief models such as Parkes' psycho social transitions in relation to 'assumed' understandings of self and society can provide a descriptor for the actions of Veterans at the Wall and the role of the Wall itself. In this, it will utilise some personal narratives. Finally, with reference to authors such as O'Brien and Allen, It will demonstrate that collections of objects deposited at the Wall evidence a continued narrative and bond directly to the dead and to the survivors' personal memories.

The Veterans

In the decades after 1975, discussions of politics, foreign and military policy, obligations to, and role of Veterans of the war, education and culture took place against the backdrop of the Vietnam War. Recollections of the war became the focal point of many divisions over how Americans should conduct their affairs in the present. As they recalled their emotional turbulence over the war, Americans created reminders of it –

memorials, films, TV shows, and novels – to shape their recollections and guide them into the present (Schulzinger, 2006: xv). Complicating this cultural process was the perception that authorities in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia held Americans prisoner after the war, which froze relations for years. Although it was almost certainly false that Americans were held captive in Southeast Asia after the war, this conviction provided a screen onto which Americans projected their feelings regarding the war, public institutions and authorities (Schulzinger, 2006: xvi).

The historians Jay Winter, Emily Rosenberg and others have labelled the phenomenon of remembering and memorizing the past as a ‘memory boom’. Much of this intensified interest originated in American uneasiness with the troublesome emotions engendered in the present by the Vietnam War. Michael Kamen has identified a ‘heightened’ American interest in recalling, memorializing, and recreating more satisfying memories of the past as a ‘response to post war anxiety and the sharp sense of discontinuity’ that arose in the 1960s and 1970s, partly as a result of the Vietnam war. Sometimes the Veterans relived it; sometimes they repressed it; often they did both in various combinations (Jespersen, 2000: 272).

The social position of veterans in American society became emblematic of the divided memories of the war. The men and women who had been to Vietnam carried the burden of the war years. Many veterans returned alienated, unhappy, and unappreciated. Others were little bothered by their Vietnam experiences, and they readjusted easily to civilian life at home. Non-veterans expressed complicated feelings of guilt, anger, pity and admiration for those who served in Vietnam (Scruggs & Swerdlow, 1992).

The serious difficulties some veterans experienced in readjustment to civilian life led to the official identification of a psychiatric condition called Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) – the unwanted repetition in the present of suppressed memories of horrifying

events. The symptoms of PTSD include intrusive memories of the horrifying event, nightmares, feelings of estrangement and detachment from others, psychic numbing, and difficulties concentrating. Aspects of PTSD extended far beyond the personal psychological stresses encountered by Vietnam Veterans to many other areas of American life. Americans who remembered Vietnam in many ways expressed social, collective and national forms of PTSD (Schulzinger, 2006: pxviii).

PTSD in this context is important because it forms a direct linkage between both veterans and non-veterans with regard to the function of the Wall. The Wall has assumed an almost sacred site of pilgrimage where millions of visitors poured out complex feelings about the war (Savage, 2009). While visitors to the Wall remained divided over whether the United States intervened properly in Vietnam and in subsequent wars, they embraced a consensus to honour the service and sacrifice of the Veterans.

The Vietnam War ended badly for the United States, and lingering public bitterness made life difficult for many Veterans. American soldiers, sailors, marines and airmen returned from Vietnam to a civilian public that regarded the war as a mistake and the results as a failure. A popular image of the Vietnam War veteran arose of a deeply troubled and psychologically wounded man, condemned to recapitulate mentally and emotionally to the anguish of fighting, killing and dying. The stereotypical Vietnam Veteran was a man at odds with the larger society, uneasy at home, and an uncomfortable reminder to non-veterans of a troublesome time in their recent past (Schulzinger, 2006: 73). The culture of the post-Vietnam era, glorifying the expression of emotion, deeply suspicious of public institutions, and, for much of the period, pessimistic, accounted for much of the ambivalence of the larger society towards the veterans.

Both veterans and non-veterans were shaken by the Vietnam experience. Their divisions about the war transformed in its aftermath into divided opinions of veterans as traditional heroes who served honourably; villains who committed inexcusable atrocities; victims of incompetent political or military leaders; suckers who needlessly put themselves in harm's way; or people so physically or psychologically damaged they could not live productive, stable lives in peacetime. Non-veterans sometimes held many of these contradictory ideas at the same time (Scott, 2004).

The experiences of the Vietnam veterans at home varied widely. By 1981, the popular image of a Vietnam Veteran was that of a maladjusted, troubled young man, at war with his country, his family, and himself. Unable to find a job or form satisfying relationships, these men drifted angrily on the margins of society. This stereotype distorted the truth in some ways, since many Vietnam veterans readjusted well to civilian life. Nevertheless, the war did psychologically wreck hundreds of thousands of veterans (Schulzinger, 2006; Scruggs & Swerdlow, 1992).

Veterans who were in Vietnam were more likely to have had their lives significantly changed by the war, but they also supported the war effort more than any other group. Vietnam veterans surveyed in 1981 reported that 43 percent supported U.S. involvement in the war, and 32 percent of Vietnam-era veterans (those who did military service elsewhere during the war years) supported the war effort, while only 18.5 percent of non-veterans thought the war was appropriate.⁸⁷ Many Veterans lamented the loss of their early idealism in the transition from the comfortable certainties of life at home to the chaos of combat in Vietnam.

Readjustment to civilian life posed a variety of problems for Vietnam Veterans, especially those who served in combat. Veterans lamented the lack of a hero's welcome

⁸⁷ House of Representatives, Committee on Veterans Affairs, *Legacies of Vietnam: Comparative Adjustment of Veterans' Administration*, March 9, 1981 (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1981, 325).

when they returned home. One told a house committee in 1981, *'there were no bands playing 'Jonny comes marching home again', no Victory day celebrations as there were after World War II. Men often relived and reflected on the hours of war when they returned home'*.⁸⁸

Another Veteran told congress, *'your mind got messed up seeing killing from both sides'*. Men often hated the Vietnamese enemy in the abstract, but the sight of a dead Viet Cong soldier often left men wondering if he had a family, wife or kids, whilst others reflected on the futility and absurdity of their combat experience. One man said, *'what stands out most in my mind are the total waste of the whole thing in terms of certainly human life first, and the dollars that it cost the country to maintain that fiasco'*.⁸⁹

Chaim Shatan, a New York psychologist and psychoanalyst noted that some Veterans got worse the longer they were home. He argued that the survivors seemed to trust no one, and believed that anyone who wanted to try and help them was a liar. Shatan wrote: *'much of what passes for cynicism is really the Veteran's numbed apathy from a surfeit of bereavement and death'* (Shatan, 1973: 648).

In both of his major papers on Vietnam Veteran therapy, Shatan wrote of a 'post-Vietnam Syndrome' that, according to his observations, often set in nine to thirty months after return from Vietnam. He described the syndrome as 'delayed massive trauma' and identified its themes to be: guilt, rage, the feeling of being scape-goated, psychic numbing, and alienation. He emphasised that these were not an accidental grab bag of symptoms, but rather stemmed from the inability of soldiers to grieve in the combat zone (Scott, 2004: 43).

Shatan confirmed his observations in a section he recorded in Scott's book; *'The so-called Post-Vietnam Syndrome confronts us with the unconsummated grief of soldiers –*

⁸⁸ Ibid: 345.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

impacted grief, in which an encapsulated, never ending past deprives the present of meaning' (Scott, 2004: 27). In both of these quotes Shatan is clearly identifying both a grief basis for the newly recognised PTSD and, importantly, a deeper process to address the loss of personal identity. This recognition would require a different approach towards Veteran therapy (Schulzinger, 2006).

The National Vietnam Resources Project (NVRP) supported the work of an informal network of alternative treatment centres for returned soldiers in large and medium-sized cities across America. The veterans met in 'rap groups' of about a dozen people to discuss their experience in Vietnam and at home. Shatan developed many of his ideas about post-Vietnam Syndrome whilst participating in these groups in New York. The mental health professionals always referred to themselves as participants in, rather than leaders of, these groups. They offered no special psychological insights, letting the Veterans reach their own conclusions.

Unlike previous group therapies, the rap groups often published what happened in their meetings. Arthur Engendorf, a veteran who participated in one of the earliest New York rap groups explained, *'The rap groups became known as a place where you could tell your story'*. Men who had been silent about their wartime experiences let loose bitter torrents about the sense of betrayal they felt. Engendorf, who went on to direct the Veterans Administration's major study of Vietnam Veterans' post war adjustment, recalled that *'the Vets who came to the early rap groups brought with them, as an overwhelming residue from the war, a deep demoralisation and loss of trust in their leaders, in the cause and in the person they were before going in'* (Scott, 1996: 17).

'When I started in the rap groups, I began to understand why I felt out of sorts, okay... We had these shrinks, but we weren't really in therapy. We were trying to explore what we were feeling about the war... The rap groups became known as a place where you could tell your stories, over

and over again. The stories reveal the discovery of some crucial ingredient, hard to name, that was missing on our side of the war... Not all the veterans talk this way of course but the vets who came to the early rap groups brought with them, as an overwhelming residue from the war, a deep memorisation and loss of trust in their leaders, in the cause and in the person they were before going in. Years before the humiliating retreat from Saigon in April 1975 and before all the exposure of official deceit and confusion in the Pentagon papers, released in 1971, many guys just knew' (Personal interviews cited in Scott, 2004: 17).

Not everyone agreed with this person centred approach. Senator Olin Teague (a 'Medal of Honour' recipient) said, *'This is tough, but we World War II Vets sucked it up and we didn't need to go into counselling – How can you little wimps be sick? A tour of duty lasted only twelve months. In World War II, soldiers fought in the war for years. How can you be traumatised?'* (Scott, 1996: 68).

Despite views like these, the evidence of a deeply troubling number of Vietnam Veterans who needed help was growing. The Disabled American Veterans estimated that five hundred thousand men who served in Southeast Asia required readjustment counselling. The Veterans Association gave an even higher estimate of seven hundred thousand.⁹⁰

Not only were the numbers very high but the severity of the problems Veterans encountered was concerning as well; *'Vietnam veterans reported a greater instance and severity of physical problems coupled with a greater instance and severity of psychological disturbances dealing with sleep-related problems, loss of control over their behaviour, inability to become close to another person, withdrawal from the external environment, hyper-alertness, anxiety and depression'* (Card, 1983: 148).

⁹⁰ House of Representatives, Hospitals and Health Care of the Committee on Veterans Affairs, *Readjustment Counselling*. April 8th 1981. Washington DC. Government Printing Office. 1981. 253.

Associated with these problems, Vietnam Veterans also reported slightly higher conviction rates for misdemeanours and felonies in the years following their military experience. Despite these long term negative consequences of their combat experience, there was evidence that Vietnam Veterans had improved their lives since exiting from the conflict (Card, 1983).

Duery Felton, the curator of the MARS collection and a Vietnam Veteran himself, makes the point that the effects of the Vietnam War on veterans varied depending on when the individual fought in it. He suggests that there are at least three phases, or even separate wars, over the thirteen years of the conflict.⁹¹ Card also supports this contention. He suggests that there was evidence that the timing of the homecoming mediated the occupational consequences of military service. Vietnam veterans, who came home in the 1970s when anti-war sentiment was high, suffered greater occupational deficits than Vietnam veterans who came home earlier (Card, 1983: 150).

Later researchers have also explored the nature of grief in the Vietnam veterans' experience. For many nurses serving in Vietnam the experience of dealing with multiple young deaths and losses began to affect them as multiple bereavements titled 'additional trauma' by Brende and Parson (1985). They claim that this focus on multiple death experiences is '*basic to understanding the profound sense of loss and impacted grief that Vietnam nurse veterans still feel today*' (Brende & Parson, 1985: 132). Whilst fully acknowledging that the data collected with the relevant chapter was related to nurses, it is equally applicable to the veterans in the field who actually knew the men who fell and who also engaged with killing during the war.

In addition to resolving guilt, an important task of the rap groups was to help the members to resolve feelings of this type of 'impacted Grief' or as Dr Shatan describes it

⁹¹ Meeting in January 2010 with author.

'Post Vietnam Syndrome'. Shatan claims that the condition confronts American society with the unconsummated grief of soldiers, which he called 'impacted grief' because of the repeated nature of the loss and bereavements suffered. He describes 'impacted grief' as a grief, *'in which an unending, encapsulated past robs the present of meaning. The sorrow is unspent; the grief of the wounds untold, their guilt is un-expiated'* (Brende & Parson, 1985: 189).

In Shatan's summary lies my essential argument that the expression of grief and guilt of veterans needs to be related to their own personal stories or narratives which, this research will argue, have found some expression through the objects that veterans choose to leave at the Wall.

One of Shatan's key treatment approaches in a staged or 'phased' program was sharply focused on dealing with both the veterans' bereavement and grief for those that had died and for that which had died within the survivors.

'First, the members began to break through their emotional detachment and share vivid traumatic experiences; current problems with jobs, problems with relationships drugs and alcohol abuse. Second, during a phase of revelation of the brutalities of war, they describe acts of violence, combat related deaths killing, and their loss of moral values and their feelings of victimization. Third, they focused on depression related to feelings of being dead or partly dead. They also concentrated on their loss of values and their insensitivity to others. Fourth they began to grieve together and earnestly help each other manage to become survivors rather than victims' (Brende & Parson, 1985: 194).

In a more generalised history about Vietnam Veterans, Scott (2004), in personal interviews with Veterans, also reports this change in focus; *'Most Brentwood*

Psychiatrists I met during this period had not the slightest clue how to take traditional mental health services too seriously. Psychiatrists and Clinical Psychologists could function within their own well-defined parameters, but they didn't know how to treat combat related stress. Nor could they provide any guidance to the kind of total integration into society that we knew was necessary' (Personal interview reported in Scott, 2004: 36). In Brentwood Veterans hospital the Doctors and other clinical staff were not permitted to run the ward, the veterans themselves took control and integrated the clinical teams into their own designed care packages. This unit called the 'Re-socialization Unit' run by veterans received referrals from all over the country (Scott, 2004: 37).

A later development in the research program run by Shatan was the role of Inpatient Specialised Treatment Units (ISTUs) specifically designed inpatient programs run in Veteran Administration hospitals. These programs were only for Vietnam Veterans suffering from PTSD (a version of which is still being run today).⁹² The program is run over a ten step sequence which has a flexible time scale but can be progressed over a number of years. The final day is always reserved for a visit to the Wall. Step 4 of ISTU is a slow and generic period which is specially functioned to allow Veterans to re-engage with their humanity by forming long term, trusting relationships with others in the group. It specifically encourages the engagement of (often postponed) grieving for both the dead and for the losses that the veteran has endured since then (Brende & Parson, 1985: 237). It is also a pathway to reintegrate Veterans back into American society.

Figley (1978), in the earliest of the major studies conducted, concluded that the Vietnam War was unique. There have been unpopular wars before, but never a war in which, despite the opposition and the nightly confrontation with the reality of combat on the television screens of America, a nation and people has managed to remain fundamentally detached and engrossed in retaining a posture of business as usual. The

⁹² <http://mentalhealth.va.gov/>, sighted 3rd July 2010.

Smithsonian Museum in Washington DC have currently set a 1960s living room with one wall covered with televisions showing clips from the Vietnam war, to represent the fact that this was the first 'visual culture', rather than real war.

More than 2.5 million served in Vietnam; yet in many ways it is as though they never went, because America did not want to notice that they had gone. Young men who felt that they had been to the brink of hell, not to mention those who were permanently disabled, returned to their country at worst to find their sacrifice hostilely repudiated, and at best treated with apathy (Figley, 1978: vii).

This rejection hurt. Vietnam veterans are frequently described as being a very angry group. It is not really sufficient to say that some of these men are, or were, angry, '*their words and the tone of the words are saturated with vindictiveness*' (Figley, 1978: 32). Figley suggests that this is a reaction to a very deep seated, unresolved grief and damaged pride. Later in his research he again addresses this question of loss, '*Rage, torture and self recrimination are not a fortuitous collection of symptoms. Clinicians are emphatic in their recognition of these as hallmarks of frustrated grief and submerged mourning. After working intimately with these men, professionals are often unable to avoid being haunted by the subtle resignation that comes to dominate their lives*' (Figley, 1978: 51).

Veterans found positive as well as negative routes to manage their grief and anger; '*I gave the opening talk for the medal turn-in ceremony. Just organising that and running it, I mean, it was probably the most powerful moment in my life because we knew how much those medals meant to us. And yet we were so upset with the politics that, you know, I can still hear the dings of those medals, the bronze stars and the silver stars bouncing of the statue of forth Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, John Marshall, and the Purple Hearts, behind the barricades, and R.S. throwing away an Air medal saying*

“This is for Lieutenant so and so, and this is for Captain so and so who died”. Ohh it was so incredible’ (Personal Interview cited in Scott, 2004: 23).

These narratives of violence, and sense of loss of self, which find the telling of story and recovery of self-identity in objects, is also powerfully asserted in this ‘one paragraph story’ from O’Brien’s semi-autobiographical novel:

‘The war wasn’t all terror and violence. Sometimes things could almost get sweet. For instance, I remember a little boy with a plastic leg. I remember how he hopped over to Azar and asked for a chocolate bar – “GI number one” the kid said – and Azar laughed and handed over the chocolate. When the boy hopped away, Azar clucked his tongue and said, “War’s a bitch”. He shook his head sadly. “One leg, for Chrissake. Some poor fucker ran out of ammo”’ (O’Brien, 1990: 31).

This short, traumatic paragraph reveals the soldiers identifying with the need to have enough ammunition over his basic humanity. It is interesting to note that O’Brien is not concerned with who shot the boy (U.S. or V.C.); Azar’s sympathy goes to the shooter who did not complete the killing because he ran out of ammunition.

Azar is not concerned with the consequences of the action; he is equally not concerned with the child, he is even happy to provide candy to him. He is identifying with the objects they, the soldiers, carried and found their own identity forged into and which defined them – in this case bullets. The object here defines the entire thought process of the soldier and is a process of his (their) identity. O’Brien is also telling a story, his story, Azar’s story and to some degree the story of all of the ‘Grunts’.

Soldiers only served a year in Vietnam and then returned ‘to the world’ (Stanton, 2003), which is indicative of their ability to isolate their experiences and time in Vietnam from

their 'other' existence in the U.S. This 'containing of emotions and identity' might be interpreted as 'repression', although I think the evidence already referenced in this chapter is indicative of anger, guilt and significantly, grief.

In any event, upon their return, those engaged in combat had to deal with the psychological consequences of the actions they had taken and the realisation of who they had become. Shatan identifies this as a loss process based upon bereavement, but ultimately what has been lost to the soldiers is much bigger. It is their pre-Vietnam identity, their sense of self and their innocence.

In the conflict, the soldiers brought their world down to the things they carried. This tiny world became their own and their identity is fused into these objects. They become precious then, perhaps even spiritual. They carried more than the metal, or cloth or wood from which they were made. They were invested with memories, friends, identifies, sorrow, pain and loss. They were profoundly moving, and linking objects that formed a continued bond with the past that could not be ignored or forgotten. In this, they also represented a conflicted construct of the loss of self. Their depositing at the Wall is therefore of enormous significance and importance. I believe this is the unspoken reason that the United States has chosen to save and preserve every object that is left there.

Assumptive Worlds: Narrating Loss

Being human entails active efforts to interpret experience; seeking purpose, meaning and significance in the events that surround us. These life experiences enable the bereaved to organise the past, direct the choices in the present and anticipate the future (Kelly, 1991). This Psychological view is compatible with a personal teleogenic plot which would use this process in a looser and non-chronological sequence. In recent

years, this personal-scientist metaphor has recognised the concept of people being essential storytellers. In this extended sense, meaning making processes, including the development of one's sense of personal identity, are hypothesized to assume a narrative as well as an anticipatory structure.

This process is not always a simple one, especially when complicated by trauma or war. O'Brien (1991) writes, *'Often in a true war story there is not even a point, or else the point doesn't hit you until twenty years later, in your sleep, and you wake up and shake your wife and start telling the story to her, except when you get to the end you've forgotten the point again. And then for a long time you lie there watching the story happen in your head. You listen to your wife's breathing. The war's over. You close your eyes. You smile and think, Christ, what's the point'* (O'Brien, 1991: 78).

Mair (1989) takes this concept further and suggests that a person's process through grief is psychologically structured by the stories that they live and the stories that they tell. There is, therefore, a narrator principle that is intrinsic to human sense making, in that we make moral choices according to narrative structures. Sarbin (1986) also picks up on this; *'The narrative way of organizing episodes, actions, and accounts of actions; it is an achievement that brings together mundane facts and fantastic creations; time and place are incorporated. The narrative allows for the inclusion of actors' reasons for their acts as well as the causes of their happening'* (Sarbin, 1986: 9).

If we accept that 'self-identity' is organised as a narrative construction, then the self can be viewed as the dominant storyteller and therefore 'autobiographically structured' (already touched upon in relation to the widows' letters). In telling this story, the person gives special significance to particular events, or groups of events which function as units of meaning (Sarbin, 1986: 33). This has two potential consequences for Vietnam Veterans: firstly if the story is not 'told' then the function (processing grief) cannot happen; worse still, if the events of the loss sustained in the war are not told, but

repressed, then the repression becomes the function of the individual's story. I believe that this is what is being resolved in the veterans' rap groups. They are functioning as a continued bonding process (Unruh, 1983) to both their own identity and the people and situations that they lost. I argue throughout my research that although verbal self-narrative is important, written letters left at the Wall and the assorted objects deposited there also carry these self-narratives (see Figures 10 and 11).

Niemeyer (2007) offers support to Unruh's identification of continued bonding activity and the use of self-narrative in this context. He suggests that personal identity emerges in the process of interaction in relation to others and not as a final product. Loss seen in this sense is critically related to the loss and experience of others. Therefore grief related story telling is defined as both a personal action and a social one. This entails learning to attribute meaning in terms intelligible to one's community and positioning oneself in relation to the context of such accounts. Tragic or traumatic loss in particular challenges the construction of previously held narrative forms and values of both self and others. It can create a new and plausible understanding of personal construct (Niemeyer, 2007: 33).

This understanding has very obvious relevance to the early rap groups in terms of dealing with their personal grief and group bereavement, and finds a very strong base of evidence in the powerful interrelationships in the Vietnam Veteran community and their interaction at the Wall. Pauline Laurent, as we have seen, only really started to recover from decades of unresolved grief when she began to be a valued part of the veteran community and was given a positive opportunity to express her loss and pain openly within that structure. It is very significant that her story ends with a visit to deposit objects at the Wall (Laurent, 1999).

This process has a clear relationship to 'continuing bonds' theory in that the narratives are about connections with other people and events, in a fluid and moving memory and

story setting, across time. There is little evidence in this of the psychodynamic concept of withdrawing emotional energy from the lost loved one to invest elsewhere (Klass *et al*, 1996). Key here in the use of narrative and the objects is that they are not structured so much to 'let go' or to 'seek closure', but to maintain symbolic connection with the deceased. This adaptation has been found to be strengthened when validated by the community of others who have suffered a similar loss (Klass, 1999; Valentine 2008).

This concept of a group dynamic in grieving has found support from a number of theorists and investigators who have adopted an explicit narrative mode for processing trauma and loss, compatible with a continuing bond. Walter (1996) suggests grieving is the social process of constructing a biography of the deceased through a narrative exploration with others:

'Bereavement is part of that never ending and reflexive conversation with self and others through which the late modern person makes sense of their existence. In other words, bereavement is a part of the autobiography and the biographical imperative – the need to make sense of self and others in a continuing narrative – is the motor that drives bereavement behaviour' (Walter, 1996: 20).

Shay (1994) invokes the role of betrayal in response to trauma and specifically in the case of combat. He describes the ways in which betrayal influenced the experience of many Vietnam Veterans; he suggests that combat, much like a family, creates the world in which the soldiers live by controlling things such as bodily function (sleeping, eating) and creating barriers to escape. He also identifies the soldiers' complete dependency on the military, and the way that they felt betrayed by it and by the communities back home. Shay suggests that this can lead to a very complex form of grieving. I would suggest that whilst Shay is right in his assertion, one of the fundamental 'control points'

for the soldiers in the field, apart from bodily functions, is their emotional investment in the objects that they carried.

O'Brien records in his book:

'On the morning after Ted Lavender died, First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross crouched at the bottom of his foxhole and burned Martha's letters. Then he burned the two photographs. There was a steady rain falling, which made it difficult, but he used heat tabs and sterno to build a small fire, screening it with his body, holding the photographs over the tight blue flame with the tips of his fingers. He realised it was only a gesture. Stupid he thought. Sentimental too, but mostly stupid. Lavender was dead. You couldn't burn the blame. Besides, the letters were in his head' (O'Brien, 1991: 19).

Soldiers who have served in every war, even those regarded as heroes, complain bitterly that no one wants to know the reality about war. Kauffman (2002: 218) asserts *'after Vietnam this reaction was very strong and very important in therapy, teaching and psychoanalysis. The audience, in this case the American public, has to live through a crisis because the listener becomes a co-owner of the traumatic event and has to construct the trauma in his or her own mind'*.

In reporting on interviewing such survivors, Kauffman quotes Bolkowsky (1987), as follows:

'The questions always seemed impertinent, gratuitous and insensitive. The answers always seemed incomplete, like shadows that are simultaneously real and unreal. Nothing is certain, no words adequate. Every statement seems equivocal and leaves the impression that it is simultaneously true and untrue... Survivors and listeners know that there lurk an infinite and

unfathomable number of meanings that are inexplicable and ungraspable'
(Kauffman, 2002: 218).

When talking to both Vietnam Veterans and those who opposed the war, often together, I have found the same reaction.⁹³ This inarticulateness, or more accurately, inability to verbalise or structure the intense loss and trauma experienced in Vietnam is one of the reasons why so many veterans leave intimate military gifts at the Wall. If a picture paints a thousand words, an object might be said to carry even more.

Objects and Veterans at the Wall

Figures 12 and 13 show personal military equipment deposited at the Wall. The first image is of a head sweatband, two identity tags and a photograph. The tags, which are assumed to be the soldiers in the photograph, show one as dead and the other as alive by checking their names on the Wall listing. It also identifies them as US Marines in Vietnam. The second image reveals a clip about a soldier dying in Vietnam. The webbing is consistent with Vietnam issue and is assumed to belong to this dying soldier (Stanton, 2003). Neither of these items has a defined history or entirely researchable route. Clearly the objects are genuine not only in terms of their origin in the conflict but also in being significant in meaning and personal narrative. They are both linking objects to the dead and to the past, perhaps having been deposited as a form of 'telling' or 'sharing' two very difficult and complex stories in a safe environment. As such, they may also suggest a possible point of release and moving forward.⁹⁴

'When the 173rd held services for their dead from 'Dak To' the boots of the dead men were arranged in formation on the ground. It was an old

⁹³ Conversations at the Wall and at the MARS Federal Archive, January 2010.

⁹⁴ The use of objects and narrative in both releasing and re-bonding is dealt with extensively by Valentine (2008). In this context, see in particular chapters 6, 7 & 8.

paratrooper tradition, but knowing that didn't reduce it or make it any less spooky, a company's worth of jump boots standing empty in the dust taking benediction, while the real substance of the ceremony was being bagged and tagged and shipped back home through what they called the KIA⁹⁵ travel Bureau. A lot of the people there that day accepted the boots as solemn symbols and went into deep prayer. Others stood around watching with grudging respect, others photographed it and some just thought it was a lot of bitter bullshit.' (Herr, 1978: 22-23)

Herr was a reporter in Vietnam and he picks out throughout his book 'dispatches' the essential nature of life for soldiers during the conflict. Although the ceremony he records was standard practice, very few reporters and no researchers have covered its intense relevance to both the veterans and the objects at the Wall.

This use of helmets and rifles was developed by the British Eighth Army to locate wounded soldiers in the deserts of North Africa. The U.S. Army adopted the practice in Normandy during rapid advances (Beevor, 2009). The United States Marine Corps (USMC) began using helmets on top of rifles as the majority of World War Two casualties for that corps were sustained on beach landings so that dead Marines were found head down facing the enemy. The USMC developed the tradition of parading with the dead men's helmets in ranks to mark their loss, and then later, perched on top of rifles.

The other elite division in the U.S. Army is 'Airborne'. They lost most men in airborne assaults, 'getting boots onto the ground', so this division paraded with boots in the ranks to represent the dead soldiers. This is the service that Herr is attending. Seeking to emulate this regimental 'bonding' process, the rest of the U.S. Army deployed in Vietnam, rapidly combined both practices and this tradition remains in use today.

⁹⁵ KIA: Killed in Action.

In Figure 15, a photograph taken in Vietnam, we can see the practice being adapted. The boots displayed are all new; the weapons likewise and with magazines removed as a security measure. Here the dead are not arrayed with the living as with the 'Airborne' tradition, but form their own separate platoon. The connection and bonding with the living is already beginning to be lost by this adaptation. U.S. soldiers only served for one year in Vietnam and left individually and the Officers only served at the front for six months. Because of this short personal exposure, the Army did not encourage very close relationships between soldiers outside of 'elite' formations (Appy, 2008).

The headwear in the photograph is worn and therefore individual to the soldiers concerned. The helmets would belong to standard soldiers or 'Grunts', but the flop or 'boonie' hats would be used by specialised 'Long Range Patrol Group Scouts' soldiers (LURPS). These were not 'Green Berets' but highly specialised soldiers chosen from, and working with, their own battalions and not as a separate force. This photograph represents a battlefield memorial. The huts in the background are a forward operating base, which has probably been attacked, as they all were at some point. It seems reasonable then that the dead are a result of an action here.

Figure 16 shows a much more informal memorial using M16 assault rifles and helmets. US Marines (note the lack of boots) are attending a service for three fallen comrades. The informality is typical for a highly professional (all Volunteer) force with a very strong 'Espirit de Corps'. All combat soldiers in Vietnam would have been very used to seeing and taking part in these services or ceremonies; *'By my recollection, about 40% of my company was killed or severely wounded during my year there'* (Scott, talking about his time as an Infantry Officer in Vietnam: Scott, 2004: XI, 9). Given such levels of casualties for those in combat, services and parades like these would have been impossible to avoid.

Clearly then, both headwear and boots would have had (indeed still do have) the function to convey grief and loss in group narratives and personal stories, which, as we have seen, are both intrinsic in processing traumatic grief. They achieve this because of specific memory prompts in relation to the point of death and immediate memorisation services. These particular items are also very powerful 'grief bearing objects' for other reasons as well.

Some of the deposited caps and helmets are very particular to units and specific experiences in Vietnam. The U.S. Marine corps does not have specialised units; all of them are considered to be elite troops (Stanton, 2003). Their headgear then is standardised and consists of a peaked cloth 'forage hat', a standard combat helmet and a white ceremonial peaked cap. During research in the MARS Federal Archive I did not find a single white ceremonial Marine hat, though I did find literally hundreds of Marine helmets (identified as the depositors had attached Marine Badges to them) and a number of forage hats. The Marines are a hard and aggressive force. They do not adopt 'Special Forces' tactics or equipment, but see themselves as a battlefield elite so their personal identity is addressed in the combat helmet, which most wore when they died in theatre.

There are very few helmets left by other units in the collection but a large number of various U.S. Army and Navy caps. The 'boonie' or 'flop hat' worn for jungle combat operations is by far the most common and often identified with strong unit, regiment or battalion patches and badges. Specialist and elite units such as LURPs, Green Berets and US Navy SEALs are all identified by their unit beret and badge. The headwear is frequently accompanied with specified items associated with the unit concerned (Allen, 1995).

Headwear is unique in shape, size and history for the user. Each serviceman has their own and it was frequently adapted to the conditions of service or 'individualised' for

personal taste. They carry, therefore, strong corporate and combined personal identities, which stand in very strong contrast to the situation veterans met on their return to the U.S.

These corporate and individual 'invested narratives' in the headwear are also conflicted. I saw no ceremonial hats. All were combat related. They were worn when the soldiers were killing, recovering and seeing friends lost. They also represent a 'loss of innocence' or perhaps a loss of 'what might have been'. The average age of troops in Vietnam was 23 (not 19 as often reported)⁹⁶ and the impact of combat at that age is telling. The caps and helmets are also very strongly personal and speak of pride and self-esteem. Perhaps more than any other item, including medals, a service person's headwear identifies who and what they are.⁹⁷ It is therefore highly significant in terms of personal identity and self-perception.

Another key item and the second single largest deposited object in the 'military' items section⁹⁸ in the MARS federal archive is Vietnam issue Jungle boots.⁹⁹ There are so many, they have not been counted (discussion with MARS Staff Jan 2010). As I have argued, soldiers came to define their world and to some extent themselves by the items they carried. The soldiers may, on occasion, have been 'chopped' into action, but when they got there they walked and carried all that they needed. The soldiers were called 'Grunts' because that is the noise they made when picking up their sacks. They would patrol or fight, often for days, without removing their boots. One item that all troops carried was 'foot powder', as preserving mobility was to preserve life. Above all else their boots came to define the soldiers' role and identity.

⁹⁶ Information gained from the biographies provided by the Department of Defence, for the web pages associated to the names on the Vietnam War Memorial found at <http://www.vvmf.org/>, sighted 21st September 2010.

⁹⁷ When visiting the Wall in December 2009, I left my hat in memory of the Commonwealth troops who died in Vietnam.

⁹⁸ The largest being 'Dog Tags'.

⁹⁹ Personal observation January 2010.

The soldiers carried their equipment but they bore the weight on their feet. The boots were the only piece of equipment that did not rot or decompose in the jungle humidity.¹⁰⁰ The boots also defined the difference between the US soldiers and the North Vietnamese. The Americans had hard wearing, ankle supporting, lightweight, but highly effective, footwear. The North Vietnamese army went to war in sandals made from old truck tires called Ho Ch Minh sandals.¹⁰¹

The soldiers bore their loads, their weight, their experience, their smells, death, and violence on their feet and through their boots. The boots are a metaphor, or a narrative, of their time in Vietnam and a constant in their changing environment, nature and identity. When walking for considerable periods over long days, soldiers hang their heads, if they are not on point, and therefore stare for long periods at their boots. It is a fact still true today that the two most significant objects for an infantryman are his weapon and his boots. Without his weapon he cannot fight, without his boots he cannot function – he becomes useless.¹⁰²

As previously stated, there is the metaphoric association of death and grief in relation to bereavement and loss rituals related to boots; both singly, as in the case of ‘Airborne’ units, and in relation to other objects from the wider U.S. army. In Hagopian’s new book on the Vietnam War and memory in American culture (Hagopian, 2009: 2, Fig. 2), the author explores most of the 78 memorials in America dedicated to the Vietnam War. The earliest of these is the iconic ‘Vietnam Veterans Memorial Chapel’, New Mexico. The chapel is revolutionary in design with simple white lines which draw the eye and present a simple, crisp but fluid space. The sense of space and peace is palpable. Internally, there is a stark, tall and thin, wooden cross. The only other object in the entire space is a pair of polished Vietnam era combat boots placed at its foot.

¹⁰⁰ Information located in the Vietnam Exhibition at the ‘Smithsonian’ Washington D.C.

¹⁰¹ On a ‘Google’ internet search dated 10th August 2010, I found over 50 sites selling Ho Chi Minh sandals.

¹⁰² Lecture given to new recruits Royal Marine Commando Training Centre, Lympstone.

The public interpretation and unspoken understanding of the role of the boots is profound. One of the two most significant and popular photographs of objects at the Wall is a pair of beaten up, old Vietnam combat boots with a U.S. Flag sticking up out of one and a sad but bright memorial flower to one side (Figure 17). The instinctive interpretation of the image and something of the narrative being expressed in the depositing of the boots at the Wall, evokes a strong sympathy and understanding from the American public.

This relationship between the Wall, the American public, the Veterans (in terms of loss and recovery), and the political context in which they function is complex. It finds its original purpose, always a fluid concept, changing, developing and growing over time.

The Wall as a Continuing Bond

As Veterans struggled with this wide variety of physical, psychological and social wounding, a public movement was growing to honour them. The widespread American public's belief that Veterans had been badly mistreated by the government and ignored by civilians who had not gone to Vietnam paved the way for the construction of the Vietnam War Memorial in The Mall, next to the Lincoln Memorial, Washington D.C. (Schulzinger, 2006). The memorial Wall, and others like it across the country, became sacred sites of commemoration where Veterans and non-Veterans alike came together to heal the wounds of the war (Savage, 2009; Hagopian, 2009).

In the decades after the war had ended, veterans found a variety of venues in which to express publicly their memories, current beliefs, anger and grief in relation to their wartime experiences. These expressions helped form a new public consensus that honoured Vietnam Veterans' service and sympathised with their struggles with incompetent and frequently uncaring government officials, but remained deeply divided about the wisdom of American involvement in the war (Scott, 2004; Schulzinger, 2006).

The concept of a memorial to recognise the men and woman who died in Vietnam belonged to Jan Scruggs, a Vietnam veteran. One night in 1979, having seen 'The Deer Hunter', Scruggs was overwhelmed by the sense of disillusioned working class communities who had their faith in their country destroyed only then to have their country disown them and compound their loss. The film accurately revealed the wider concept of loss endured by those both in combat and those left at home. The movie badly affected Scruggs who, after a night of drinking which prompted an episode of PTSD, decided to give himself over to constructing the Wall.

Scruggs began to raise money for the memorial, telling potential donors that the concept of the memorial was to promote societal acknowledgement of the sacrifice and a need for national reconciliation after the war. He also hoped that the memorial would ease the embarrassment he and other Veterans had from serving in the conflict (Scruggs and Swerdlow, 1992).

In 1980 Congress approved the construction of the memorial. Senator Charles Matthias said, *'for all Americans the memorial will express the spirit of reconciliation and reunion that preserves us as a nation. Today, Vietnam is now far enough past that we can hopefully look to the reconciliation of the nation after the divisions of the war'* (Schulzinger, 2006: 96).

The memorial was becoming a visible sign of reconciliation. Already the memorial had grown bigger than the needs of the veterans and, as we have seen, bigger than a simple marker for the dead. The Veterans remained the dominant group but, by happy chance, because the Wall became a national monument, it allowed the Veterans a place to meet their dead, their past and the nation who gathered there. It became a gateway back 'into the world'.

President Carter, when speaking at the Wall picked up on this theme, Quoting from Philip Caputo's novel on the Vietnam War:

'So much was lost with you, so much talent, intelligence and decency. The country for which you died wishes to forget the war in which you died. It's very name is a curse. It was not altogether sweet and fitting your death, but I am sure that you died believing that it was pro patria (for your country)'.

He did not add the next sentence: *'your country was not'* (Schulzinger, 2006: 97).

Carter was booed because he had never served in his country's forces. He was not the only one to create controversy at a monument that had so quickly captured the hearts and imaginations of the U.S. Public. Figure 18 shows the single most iconic and copied photographic image of the Wall. Taken by Peter Marlow for the Vietnam Veterans' tenth anniversary at the Wall in 1985, I have seen this image used on the front cover of seven books about post-Vietnam politics, including Schulzinger's.

The image shows a Veteran in 'tiger stripe' combats and a 'boonie' jungle flop hat. Both of which are indicative of Special Forces service (Stanton, 2003). In his right hand he holds a tri-cornered National Flag which is the standard presentation of colours placed upon a soldier's coffin and then presented to the next of kin. Such flags should never be reopened and are preserved in the triangular shape. The unnamed veteran is holding the flag against the names on the Wall. He is clearly distressed and may possibly be coming out of a Veterans Administration PTSD treatment program, which has its close at the Wall on significant dates. At his neck is the firm hand of a civilian attired supporter.

The image is iconic for many reasons. It encapsulates the purpose and the many functions of the Wall. The Veteran is clearly working through his grief, loss and trauma.

He is meeting his comrades at the Wall and mourning them. In this, the Wall is operating as a meeting place between the living and the dead, but also the 'what was' and what 'might have been'. He is doing this using three 'linking' or 'transactional' grief related objects. Firstly the Wall itself, which as Savage (2009) and many other commentators have suggested, is a perceived 'Sacred' meeting site; secondly, the memorial flag which clearly represents Nationhood and loss; and thirdly his own identity as a veteran is invested in his choice of combat uniform. His tears and pain are symbolic of the nation's hurt and pain but here in the photograph they represent a process of reconciliation, both for him and for the American nation.

Note that the Veteran is not alone in his pain. He stands visibly with the U.S. dead listed upon the Wall.¹⁰³ The names are not alphabetical but chronological so it is very likely that he may have identified a group of fallen friends rather than a single name. He is also supported by the hand of an individual who is not identified as a soldier. He is, in effect, being held by the whole nation itself.

By the year 2000, the interpretation of this image underwent a radical overhaul. Figure 19 shows both the printing plate for and the U.S. postage stamp issued in that year as a result of a public vote. In this image the Veteran is still reaching for the Wall but now he stands alone, proud and able to deal with his own pain and loss without the support of the nation or anyone else. He is no longer a victim, now he is a warrior remembering and honouring his friends. The tri-con flag has also gone. The Wall no longer speaks of waste of life and pointless sacrifice and a nation that does not care or want to remember. Now, the Wall is a proud symbol, reflecting a new United States that has reinvented itself. This symbol of pride and hope is developed and symbolically recognised in the final change: a beam of light crosses the memorial stone and highlights the names, the Veteran's hands and head and forms a continuous link

¹⁰³ There is no memorial in America for the two million Vietnamese who died.

between him, the dead and heaven. The dead and the past are not the subject of anger and loss; they are now blessed by the light above.

The stamp may reflect political interpretation (I have found no other commenter who has identified these changes) and it may well suggest a dominant political view of service and sacrifice. But it also identifies a change in the use and function of the Wall over time, which I will address in later chapters. The Wall is still the home of the veteran but the nature, and identity, of the Vietnam Veteran has, for many, also changed over time.

Figure 20 shows an 'Air Cavalry' (Aircav) Hat. This object is very evident of changing identities and conflicted approaches and perhaps signals a positive development in the use of the Wall by veterans over time. The hat is not U.S. Government Issue, nor has it been approved for informal wear by the U.S. military (Stanton, 2003). It is, to use a military expression, 'pirate rig'. That is, a uniform locally adapted without formal permission for specific military use or expression. It is based upon the uniform worn by the United States Cavalry 1870-1890. Even then it probably owes more to John Wayne than to historical fact.

The hat has a number of specific identifiers on it. The acorn ended headband is resonant of field rank associated with officers in 20th century dress uniform. I note from photographs that it is worn (sometimes in gold) by all ranks at the Wall. The cross swords are the Cavalry emblem from the 19th century with the unit identifiers inserted (in this case, 9th Air Cavalry Division, 1st Battalion). The three badges on the side of the hat signify associated regiments, battalions or units that would have been associated with the operational Aircav unit. For instance, mobile hospital units, artillery support or dedicated Air support, which the depositor may have worked or fought with (Stanton, 2003).

This object may not be representative of the loss, pain and trauma that other objects (particularly headwear) left at the Wall carry. This hat never saw service in the field and carries no memories of pain and loss; it is not a 'linking' object in the sense of the 'battle used' hats. This hat represents pride, remembrance, and victory, which again sets it apart from the other objects.

In his book, 'We were Soldiers Once and Young' (Galloway & Moore, 2002),¹⁰⁴ Lt. General Moore tells the story of his regiment's deployment to Vietnam. His was the first air-mobile (Aircav) unit to deploy in 1965. His tale, though documenting army incompetence, also conveys a very strong sense of purpose and pride. His unit was re-designated the 1st battalion, 7th Cavalry just before deploying. This unit identifying prefix is known to every American as it is the regiment that George Armstrong Custer commanded at the Battle of the Little Bighorn in 1876, where his entire regiment was surrounded by combined Native American warriors and destroyed. It was considered the single biggest U.S. defeat until Pearl Harbour.

Moore, then a Colonel, took his four hundred and fifty men into a forward operating base at La Drang via his Huey helicopters, only to find himself surrounded by an entire army of North Vietnamese Regulars. During the next four days Moore and his men, using new techniques of close air and artillery support, fought off and then defeated their two thousand attackers, killing most of them.

In doing this, Moore established the 'Standard Operating Procedure' (SOP) for the U.S. forces in the Vietnam War. It was an outstanding action and an astonishing success. What is less known is that after the action the relief regiment (5th Aircav) was ambushed on its exit, without air support and almost wiped out. This also set a (negative) template for the same war (Galloway & Moore, 2002).

¹⁰⁴ Made into a Major motion picture starring Mel Gibson.

Moore found himself in the same situation as Custer but by dint of very professional training, and the radical use of new tactics, completely reversed his position. Westmoreland, the commanding General in Vietnam at this point, deployed the tactics used into the wider army. This also set the 'attrition war' strategy that was ultimately to lose the war for America (Cawthorne, 2008; Greiner, 2009).

Aircav then became symbolic not of defeat but of victory, even though it was pretty much the only significant one until the Tet Offensive, as the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) from then on fought a Guerrilla war. It is of note then that the veterans of this unit chose headwear and clothing that stood them in stark contrast to the other veterans and the government, who may have been seen to symbolise defeat. A veteran U.S. soldier at the Wall told me he hated the 7th Aircav because without their 'win' the rest of the conflict might have been very different or may even not have happened.¹⁰⁵

Moore's second book 'We are Soldiers Still' explores the recovery from the war for him and his soldiers and of their needing to establish contact with their former enemies and then of the regiment's return to Vietnam to meet their former foes and, in some instances, to apologise. The mental scars and questions about the war's morality haunt Moore's men just as in any other unit. However, because as a unit they were able to deal with their trauma together and because they are valued and respected (Moore's book is required reading at West Point), their use of the Wall over time has changed positively and dramatically.

Figure 21 displays this point precisely. The soldier on the left in the photograph taken at the Wall, is dressed in the unofficial Aircav uniform. He has transferred his (officer's) rank and unit identifiers directly from his formal uniform to his informal one and there is no additional material. His cravat, carrying the title 'LZ Zulu', the name of the battle that

¹⁰⁵ Discussion at the Wall, January 2010, with author.

Moore and his men fought, identifies him as part of that unit. The memorial flowers represent the Aircav badge and the yellow display the Vietnam War medal.

The soldier to the right is an enlisted man, who has chosen to wear multiple identifiers and emblems which identify his service and his history with other units and people. He too fought in the battle, as evidenced by the 'La Drang' identifier he carries. It is noteworthy that like many of this unit, he has chosen to wear 'dream catchers' and other North American Native emblems on his person, although he is clearly not a native of the tribes. He is here identifying himself not just with Custer but with the warriors who killed Custer and his men.¹⁰⁶ He is both victor and victim; his position is confused, contradicted and messy. He shows very clearly that what is happening at the Wall does not fit any one bereavement theory precisely. His attire and presence with his comrades does, I would argue, though, represent a form of continuing bonding (Unruh, 1983).

Leaving the objects that the veterans cannot, or need not, continue to live with, and recovering a bond with their loss, be that friend, unit, country or personal identity, are complex and fluid endeavours. It is the visual and structural neutrality of the Wall coupled with its significance that allows this fulcrum-ing of grief in many different contexts to happen (Sturken, 2006).

Summary

The Vietnam War ended appallingly for the United States. Public bitterness and disinterest made life difficult for many veterans. American service men and women returned from Vietnam to a society that regarded the war as a mistake and the results

¹⁰⁶ Themselves victims of genocide.

as a failure. A popular image of the Vietnam War Veteran arose of a deeply troubled and psychologically wounded man, condemned to recapitulate mentally and emotionally the anguish of fighting, killing and dying. Shatan (1973), (New York psychologist) noted that some veterans got worse the longer they were home. He suggested that survivors seemed to trust no one, and believed that anyone who wanted to try and help them was a liar. He was the first to suggest that although PTSD was due to many different causes, at the heart of the Vietnam veterans' experience was loss. Perhaps the most difficult loss to function was their own sense of who they were.

If we accept that 'self-identity' is organised as a narrative construction, then the self can be viewed as the dominant storyteller and therefore 'autobiographically structured'. In telling this story, the person gives special significance to particular events, or groups of events, which function as units of meaning (Sarbin, 1986: 33). I believe that this 'restoring of self' is what is being resolved in the veterans' rap groups. They are functioning as a continued bonding process (Unruh, 1983) to both their own identity and the people and situations that they lost. I argue throughout this research that although verbal self-narrative is important, the written letters left at the Wall and the assorted objects deposited there provide further and important means of 'story-ing' one's grief.

The Wall though is contested. It is an open memorial that has a multitude of users and agendas. The Wall was only given permission to be built on the understanding that it was to be an 'instrument of healing', bringing together those of all shades of opinion, persuasion and belief in America (Scruggs & Swerdlow, 1992). There are those, such as Patrick Hagopian (2009), who are troubled by the political compromises that the Wall brings in 'fogging history' and preventing America facing its past and learning for the future.

What cannot be contested is that the Wall has become a place of unique, and perhaps accidental, healing for the Veterans. It forms a bridge between the living and the dead and permits a form of release for some and re-bonding for others. It has facilitated a 'sacred' space allowing many Veterans to 'fulcrum' their loss and move on with their own personal narratives through the objects they entrust to be preserved there.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A Veteran's story: Luttrell

Introduction

This chapter forms the second part of the couplet which addresses Vietnam veterans' experience of grief and loss, as expressed at the Wall, utilising specific objects. Building on the narratives of veterans explored in the last chapter, it will focus on one man's (Luttrell) experience of depositing a letter and a photograph at the Wall. Using the framework of the teleogenic plot, the chapter will explore his twofold journey from the point of leaving these objects, into his past to reconnect to his personal history and on to a narrative projection into the future.

This exploration results in a unique 'second' depositing of a MARS object with a Vietnamese family described, in part, in his own words and in the narrative of a commentator filming for NBC. Using continuing bonds theory (Klass *et al*, 1996), psycho social transition (Parkes, 1998) and narrative theories, including Heonik Kwon's (2008) 'ghost narratives', this chapter will explore the role of material culture and specific objects in helping a deeply distressed veteran to make sense of his experiences of grief and loss.

The Vietnamese call the conflict with the U.S. the 'American War' (1960-1975). This war was, factually, a civil war, but in an odd twist it was equally an American civil war (Kwon, 2008: 13); *'More divisive than any conflict Americans have engaged in since the Civil War, the Vietnam war raised questions about the nation's very identity. These questions have not been settled. The battle over interpreting the Vietnam war is a battle over interpreting America and it continues to this very day'* (Powell & Persico, 2001: 208).

According to another observer, the war was waged not just on distant battlefields but also *'in the uncharted depths of the American psyche and in the obscurity of our nation's soul'* (Neu, 2006: 6). Kwon suggests that the Vietnamese have followed a similar route and that now, a generation after the war has ended, they are discovering a new dimension of what has been. They are doing this through the official discourse, in an unambiguous and uncontested struggle of the unified nation against the memory of an aggressor.

The phenomenon of war ghosts is intimately connected in both Vietnam and America in relation to the memory of the war. The Wall has a myriad of differing spiritualities but there is a significant minority who literally find the ghosts of the young men and women there (Duarte, 2002). And this connection across cultures finds an echo with the concept of both sides having undergone national 'Civil Wars', as Young (1999) suggests. This research argues that both sides in the Vietnam War underwent similar death and loss experiences and in both cases, these experiences can be further illuminated through continuing bonds theory, material and narrative objects in specific relation to psycho social transitions, in spite of the very different cultures involved. Thus, these models will be applied alongside a cultural perspective.

The first chapter in this couplet showed examples of American veterans returning to Vietnam¹⁰⁷ and discovering the similarities of this shared experience, often much to their own surprise (Galloway & Moore, 2008). I will use the text from a NBC documentary¹⁰⁸ to follow one American veteran's grief and loss journey across thirty years, which finally concludes in a jungle village in North Vietnam.

NBC Documentary Commentary from 'NBC Dateline International'

¹⁰⁷ An increasingly common experience for Veterans with specific tours now being arranged by travel agents. See the Vietnam Veterans of America site: <http://vva.org> sighted 1st October 2010

¹⁰⁸ Found at http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/24818399/ns/datetime_nbc-international/.

(Italics indicate dialogue which is unattributed voice over)

RICH LUTTRELL: It was the one moment, and the one act in combat that has been a burden for me for 33 something years.

It was 1967. Richard Luttrell, just barely old enough to sign up, was where he wanted to be – In the 101st airborne. He volunteered for Vietnam.

LUTTRELL: The day I got to my unit, the chopper came down in the jungle - and I saw the members of my platoon standing around my age... and these were some tough-looking guys. Just their eyes. And I can remember thinking 'My God, what have I got myself into?

And so this puny kid from the projects found himself in a world for which no amount of training could adequately prepare. It is hot here, or wet, or both. No roof, no bed, no rest, no break from the fear. Just a scrawny kid with a back pack almost as big as he was who learned that the first rule is, you keep going and going and going.

LUTTRELL: There was times I can remember really trying to choke the tears back – like, 'God, please stop, I can't go no more'. And we'd do that from daylight till dark. And I thought, 'What am I gonna do if we get in a firefight? I can't move, I'm so tired. What do I do in a firefight?'. And I never was prepared for that...

And then came the day that changed everything. It was hot, as always, like wearing a coat in a steam room, he had no idea his enemy was just a few feet away in the jungle.

LUTTRELL: Out of the corner of my right eye I see movement... I could see an NVA soldier leaning over with an AK 47, squatting.

KEITH MORRISON, Dateline NBC: First time you'd ever seen a North Vietnamese soldier.

LUTTRELL: Right, in my whole life, ever seen one.

He was barely 18, suddenly flooded with fear. His body seemed to freeze. He couldn't let it.

LUTTRELL: I had to react. I had to do something, it was my decision.

He was in the enemy's gun sight. Death was a heartbeat away. He turned, and looked the enemy soldier full in the face.

LUTTRELL: It seemed like we stared at each other for a long time.

And then, like it was all in slow motion, he pulled the trigger.

LUTTRELL: And I just started firing, full automatic. And he went down. It turned into a pretty heavy firefight. And I wasn't smart enough to hit the ground - and somebody tackled me, and took me to the ground.

MORRISON: Did you realize that particular North Vietnamese soldier could have killed you before you even saw him?

LUTTRELL: Absolutely, absolutely. And I've wondered even today - I go through my mind and I wonder why didn't he fire?

But that is not what played on Rich, haunted him, year after year after year: not the gunfight, nor living in the moment of that terror. There would be a lot of that.

No, it was the one thought he hadn't truly considered before... wasn't prepared for it.

LUTTRELL: After the firefight is over. After the adrenaline rush is over, and you're all soaking wet, and you feel like your legs won't hold you. And it hits you - I just took a life.

And that's when he saw it: the tiny photograph. Right there on the jungle path is where it began to weave a whole new story for his life.

LUTTRELL: I seen this picture sticking out partially out. It looked like (closes eyes) the face of a little girl with some long hair or something. And I pulled it out and it was real tiny. And it was a picture of a soldier and a little girl. I can remember holding the photo and actually squatting and getting close to the soldier and actually looking in his face and looking at the photo, and looking at his face.

Here was the man he had just killed. But who was that little girl? His daughter?

LUTTRELL: They seemed so serious. So, sad, somehow. Like the picture was taken just before they said goodbye. Before her father went off to war.

MORRISON: And that hit you?

LUTTRELL: It hit me really hard.

Not for long, mind you. Rich stuffed the tiny picture into his wallet. And within minutes they moved out again. Not for a moment, by the way, should you believe that Rich was a reluctant soldier. When it came time again to use his weapon he did not hesitate.

He developed an uncommon expertise at the dangerous and gruesome business of clearing underground tunnels of enemy personnel. He became skilled at hand to hand combat, at surviving.

LUTTRELL: I can remember being on a hill one night and mortar rounds just pounding in the dark, and hearing guys screaming and getting blown out of holes. And pulling my rucksack over my head and thinking, 'God, don't let one hit me'.

He had just 20 days left, when the bullet ripped into his back. The wound that sent him home...

LUTTRELL: I can remember, when I got on the helicopter, all of a sudden this tremendous guilt hit me, like, 'Where are you going? What are you doing? What are you leaving these guys for?'

Rich came home to a case full of medals and married his hometown sweetheart, Carole. And as the '60s gave way to the '70s, the '80s he tried to put Vietnam behind him.

CAROLE: He really didn't talk about Vietnam for years. It just was something he kept very personal, and very hidden.

But all the while, there in his wallet, was that picture. The little girl who would not let him go. Of course, he didn't know yet - how could he? What that little image had in store for him.

LUTTRELL: I really formed a bond, especially with the little girl in the photograph... It was so odd, so strange.

All the horrors Rich had seen in battle... and it was this little face that kept coming back to haunt him.

LUTTRELL: Here's a young daughter doesn't have a father thanks to me.

Year after year, he kept it in his wallet. As the torment he felt failed to go away... as it settled on his life like a darkening cloud.

CAROLE: The only thing I could ever say was, 'why don't you just get rid of it. You know? Let it go. And get it out of your life and you can forget it and go on'.

And, 20 years after his return from Vietnam, that is what Rich determined to do. They were on vacation, he and Carol, in Washington, D.C. And when he saw the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Rich knew what he could do now with the tattered little photograph.

LUTTRELL: I said, 'you know that picture?'; I said, 'I'm going to leave it at the wall'. And her face lit up. I could just see, this was something good.

And, sitting in their hotel, he decided to do it right.

LUTTRELL: I sat down on the bed with just a scratch pad that was in the hotel room, I started thinking, I thought, if there was any way possible that you could talk to that soldier, what would you say, you know? And in like, just a couple of minutes, I scribbled out a little note.

In it, he said those few little things he'd always wanted to say. Not that he regretted being in that war... not that he regretted serving his country. No, he didn't. It was instead that unending guilt, that uncontrollable sorrow, at having taken away a young father's life.

LUTTRELL: "Dear Sir, For 22 years, I've carried your picture in my wallet. I was only 18 years old that day we faced one another on that trail in Chu Lai, Vietnam. Forgive me for taking your life. So many times over the years, I've stared at your picture and your

daughter, I suspect. Each time, my heart and guts would burn with the pain of guilt. Forgive me sir”.

The next day, Rich placed the photo and the letter at the foot of the memorial, under the names of 58,000 Americans who lost their lives in Vietnam.

LUTTRELL: And at that moment, it was like I had just finished a firefight and dropped my rucksack and got to rest. That load I was carrying was gone. It was gone.

MORRISON: All lifted off.

LUTTRELL: Oh, all lifted off. Just felt great. I felt free. Felt relieved, I felt free.

Or so he thought. Every day, hundreds of people say goodbye to bits and pieces of the war and leave them here along these granite walls and every single thing - sacred or profane - is collected and boxed up by park rangers. Including Rich's photo. Which just happened to land at the top of one of those boxes, which just happened to land face up... which just happened to be seen by another Vietnam veteran who knew right away that this was something different.

DUERY FELTON: I thought ‘what is this?’, so I reached down and picked it up.

Duery Felton is curator of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial collection. He has seen just about everything here. But a picture of an enemy soldier?

DUERY FELTON: I really did a double take.

MORRISON: Don't often see a thing like that at the wall?

DUERY: Well, I haven't seen it in about 30 odd years, that green uniform.

And he read Rich's letter of apology.

DUERY: I read that letter and it was about taking a life. It's very difficult to do that. That decision has to be made in a matter of seconds. And you have to live with those decisions the rest of your life. So it was somewhat comforting, if that's the proper term, to know that someone else has been through that, and they set it down on paper.

And before long the little photo and all the emotion it conjured up, infected this veteran, too. A tiny determined spirit floating from one old soldier to the next, reminding them both of the price they paid for pulling the trigger.

DUERY: That haunted me for years and years as to who the little girl was.

MORRISON: What is it about that image that was so powerful that you'd hang on to it? That he'd hang on to it? That you couldn't let it go in a way?

DUERY: I think it resonated some place in my psyche. You have to understand I was in a combat unit. This is about taking someone's life.

Of course Rich knew none of this back in Rochester, Illinois. He was getting on with his life. He thought he was finished with that little girl. Except she... wasn't yet finished with him.

There is a powerful silent emotion that surrounds the monuments to America's wars. And at this one, the remarkable wall, a great and ever growing collection of the bits and pieces of survivor memories and grief. When Duery Felton was asked to help produce a book, 'offerings at the wall', he had a warehouse of objects and images from which to

choose. He put the little girl, and Rich's letter, right there in the middle. And of course Rich, who by now worked for Veterans Affairs, received a copy.

LUTTRELL: And I turned to page 53 and there was the picture of the picture I had left at the wall, and the note I'd wrote to the soldier.

It was as if she were staring right at him, refusing to go away. As if she was accusing him of trying to abandon her...

LUTTRELL: For me, that moment was, it was almost a nightmare. It was like, you know, 'Little girl, what do you want from me?' You know, 'what do you want from me?'

Now the obsession returned full force. He knew he had to get the picture back. So he contacted Duery Felton, who'd become so attached to the photo himself he personally flew from Washington D.C. to Illinois to hand deliver it back to Rich. And anyone who didn't understand might have found it rather strange that two middle aged men, who didn't know each other, had never met, would hold on and weep real tears for a small girl neither knew.

LUTTRELL: And I was talking to my wife one evening and I said, 'You know, I don't know if it's something mystic, or fate, but I said... somehow I have to return this picture'. And she said, 'What do you mean?' And I said, 'I'm gonna find that little girl, I'm gonna find that family of that soldier'.

A ridiculous idea, of course. He no longer knew the country, or the language, or what she looked like now, or even if she was alive.

CAROLE: I didn't badger him and say 'You can't do it. Just give up. Forget it. It ain't happening. It's not worth the effort, I'm tired of hearing it'. I didn't say any of that, because it wouldn't have stopped him.

MORRISON: Did you get tired of hearing it?

CAROLE: Yeah.

MORRISON: This is an obsession?

CAROLE: (emotional) Yep.

MORRISON: Hard on you as much as on him?

CAROLE: Yep.

MORRISON: How much did you want that to go away?

CAROLE: I don't know that I wanted it to go away. I wanted him to find peace with it.

So Rich called a newspaperman he knew in St. Louis.

LUTTRELL: And we sat, probably a couple of hours talking about it. And the story made the front page of the Post Dispatch on Sunday, I believe.

The plan kept forming as he went. He folded up the article, and stuck it in a letter to the Vietnamese ambassador in Washington D.C.

LUTTRELL: And he told me he would forward it to Hanoi. And he said something to the effect of, 'Maybe we'll get lucky'.

MORRISON: It's a needle in a haystack. It's a, it's a big country.

LUTTRELL: Oh I know, yeah. Million to one, million to one.

And so a copy of the photograph made its way all the way around the world again to the capitol of Vietnam, to Hanoi. Where an enterprising newspaper editor recognized a good story when he saw one, and published the photograph along with an appeal: 'Does anyone know these people?'. If the article failed to hit its mark, well it was a shot in the dark anyway. But there's another way newspapers make their way around. A time-honoured tradition - as wrapping paper.

It just so happened that a man in Hanoi decided to send his mother a care package. He happened to wrap that package in this newspaper, the one containing Rich's photo. And then, by some bizarre coincidence, probably, the package made its way to a rural village north of Hanoi, where an old woman unwrapped it, saw the photo, took it to a neighbouring hamlet, and told a woman there, 'Here, this is your father'. And before long, thousands of miles away, Rich Luttrell received a letter. The girl had a name: Lan. She had children herself.

LUTTRELL: It just didn't seem possible, it seemed surreal. I just couldn't believe it was happening. And of course, all that emotion again, and you know, now it's real.

And it was complicated, too. He wrote a letter to Lan and her family, trying to explain how he felt.

LUTTRELL: The difference between guilt and regret. I do carry some guilt because of that action. But I have no regret as a soldier, and participation in that war. And it was important for me to make sure they understood that.

But around then, it finally dawned on him: he would have to go back to Vietnam himself. He would have to carry the photo and give it back.

But how could he face his own closet full of horrors... and how would he face the girl?

LUTTRELL: How do you tell a little girl, 'Hi, my name's Rich Luttrell, I killed your father in Vietnam'.

LUTTRELL: There's a risk there, there really is. There's a risk there. I don't know how they're going to react.

It was early one springtime when Richard Luttrell set out in search of a cure for what tortured him.

LUTTRELL: The whole thing's bigger than I am. It's hard for me to understand it sometimes myself.

Years ago, he swore that he would never go back to that place. He had seen too much killing, too many horrors... All that suffering reflected in that one small image.

But now, here he was... on his way to Vietnam. Drawn by a photo no bigger than a postage stamp... And like a live thing, it had made its way: from a dead man to a dusty trail in Vietnam, to an American GI, a war memorial, to a book, to a wallet, to this bag, on its way home...

LUTTRELL: This is the flight I've been looking for...

To present the picture to that little girl, the daughter of the man he killed. Will he even know her? He's no teenaged grunt. And she must be 40 or so. It's the smell that hits him first. Every memory has one: Normandy, Vietnam, Iraq. The day before he is to meet the girl, now woman, in the photo, Rich is almost beyond nervous.

LUTTRELL: I'd almost rather face combat again than face this girl.

It is a cloudy Wednesday morning in Hanoi. Rain is threatening, as Rich boards a van for the two and a half hour drive to Lan's village. A drive through a world changing fast but still utterly different. Past markets crowded with faces amazed to see this entourage... this white-haired man. The village draws closer in the van he fidgets, edgy... And then, suddenly, Rich and Carole are walking. Here is where that sombre, serious soldier lived, had his children, the place to which he never returned.

MORRISON: How're you feeling?

LUTTRELL: Nervous.

And then, just around a stone wall, Rich sees a woman. And is sure...

LUTTRELL: I've already seen her, I know who she is.

He takes a moment, to compose himself, then walks toward her. And here they are. They had never laid eyes on each other before. For a few seconds, they don't know what to say. They are intimate strangers.

He recites a sentence he has learned in Vietnamese:

'Today', he says, 'I return the photo of you and your father, which I have kept for 33 years. Please forgive me'.

Finally, it all comes pouring out. This terrible, painful release. As if right now at this moment she is finally able to give in to grief, and cry for the father she never really knew. She clutches Rich as if he were her father himself, finally coming home from the war. Her brother tells us that both of them believe that their father's spirit lives on in Rich. They expect we'll think it's just superstition... and, perhaps, they say, it is... but for them, today is the day their father's spirit has come back to them. The whole village has turned out to see the photo returned... Once Rich had wondered about formality, ceremony. But not now.

LUTTRELL: Tell her this is the photo I took from her father's wallet the day I shot and killed him and that I'm returning it.

She is 40 years old, and it's the first time she has held the photo of herself and her father in her hands. And in this moment, and during the afternoon that followed...

LUTTRELL: He died a brave man, a courageous warrior.

In the company of former enemies, Rich Luttrell felt as if his wounded soul had been stitched up and made new again.

LUTTRELL: I'm so sorry.

Psycho-Social Transition and the Wall

Luttrell's narrative begins by establishing a background in which several differing forms of loss are revealed. He is a volunteer in a very controversial war and what is significant is that he is in an elite unit. He is, by his own admission escaping from the 'projects', American slums. Almost as soon as he meets the members of his platoon, Luttrell realises that Vietnam is not what he expected. His 'assumed' world is not present. Rather, he is exposed to constant violence and uncertainty and extremes of emotion; most significantly fear and exhaustion. This is the occasion when Luttrell makes his first 'kill' (to use his expression) and becomes immediately traumatised. Luttrell starts to identify in his text an immediate sense of loss and failure to adapt; in this, I would argue, he begins to lose something of himself.

Colin Murray Parkes (1998) and Stroebe *et al* (2006) explain a model that encompasses individual diversity but also provides a frame of reference for both understanding and making some sense of one's own and an others' loss. This model sees bereavement as a psychosocial transition promoting adaptation to change. This wider view of the nature of loss as both an individual and socio-cultural experience makes it uniquely useful in engaging with both the personal and the national trauma of multiple loss that was experienced in the Vietnam War. The model is also adaptable enough to allow other models, or understandings, of bereavement to run alongside, or be interlaced, with it. For this reason I propose to use this model as a fine tool for exploring the relationship between grief, story and objects; particularly Luttrell's letter and photograph, both left at the Wall, within the broader structure and understanding of continuing bonds theory.

Parkes suggests that, in part, our bodies make sense of our loss for us, in that the central nervous system has been designed to do just that (Parkes, 2006 (b): 91). We are able to process complex emotions and impressions into internal models of the world and, in doing this, we are then eventually able to recognise, and re-engage with, the world that

we experience and predict and our own and the behaviour of others within it. This model is both simple in its construct and complex in its adaptability.

The experience of grief that arises directly from bereavement has been well researched, but a lack of grief when faced with bereavement, or grief that is unrelated to bereavement, has been less well theorised. This difficulty in expressing loss and grief is especially true of the Vietnam conflict, which encompasses multiple dynamics of loss relating to the soldiers, their families and very complex societal and cultural reactions to the deaths and trauma experienced during that period. Parkes states that grief is *'essentially an emotion that draws us toward something or someone who is missing'* (Parkes, 2006 (b): 92). This provides a functional tool for developing a useable process for researching what happens at the Wall. Grief, then, distinguishes 'what is' against what 'should be', or the perceived 'should be'. It needs noting that the Parkes model does not account for, for example, the diverse experiences of many widows of the Vietnam War who, as their letters have revealed, might have much in common in their experience of bereavement, whilst each grief journey is also unique. Thus, Parkes' perspective needs to be used flexibly.

Rahe (1979) suggests that with regard to mental health and bereavement, the most significant events are those that require an individual to completely reassess their view of the world, are lasting in their implications and happen rapidly, thus allowing little preparation. These are the set criteria that Parkes uses to define his psycho social transitions bereavement model and sets the model's operating boundaries. Parkes excludes events that are short lived but remain threatening or even terrifying, as he argues these are more complex situations and have their own pathology.

In direct contradiction to Parkes' assertion, Jeffery Kauffman's work (2002) specifically deals with trauma and loss from an 'assumptive' model, drawn from the larger remit of PST, and I note that Parkes has authored the postscript. Drawing from Kauffman's

perspective, the Vietnam conflict can be seen to have imposed a significant internal reordering of the world by those who suffered loss. Vietnam is eight thousand miles from the U.S. and by the nature of the war (America was never threatened by the NVA, and there had been no 'Pearl Harbour'), and the general ignorance of the conditions of the war meant that there was very little preparation for both the soldiers and the families left at home.

The defining set of criteria associated with PSTs is particularly relevant to the Vietnam War. Parkes does suggest in a particular chapter that his model excludes trauma and violence from its pattern of usage and certainly the Vietnam conflict suffered from these conditions (Stroebe *et al*, 2006). But the Wall is visited by veterans and their families, plus others who may be experiencing very different, often non-trauma based forms of bereavement, for whom the national trauma of this conflict, with its guilt and regrets, may represent a significant loss. As the previous chapter has shown, for many, post traumatic stress is an unlikely consequence; rather some form of psychosocial transition may be a more appropriate choice of model for exploring people's experiences at the Wall, the gifts and their associated stories, within the larger remit of continuing bonds.

According to Parkes (1998) the internal nature of the world that must change in an individual undergoing a PST would consist of expectations and assumptions, which have become invalidated by the life change (bereavement or loss). This 'assumptive' world contains everything that is assumed to be true based on the individual's previous experience. Parkes suggests that we orientate ourselves by matching incoming sensory data against these assumptions to orientate ourselves and plan our responses accordingly. If we were to lose a limb, for example, then getting out of bed, turning on a light, washing, dressing and driving to work would all be invalidated in the previous mindset (Parkes, 2006 (b): 94). It is the same with a significant loss. Individuals may have to reorder their 'assumptive world' to cope with the changes that have been imposed. The death of a spouse or significant other forms of loss invalidate

assumptions that permeate many aspects of life. It is adapting to that change that makes the experience of bereavement, considered as a psychosocial transition, so difficult and painful.

Applying the theory of PST to the national level, it is significant to note that all the Vietnam memorials in the United States, sixty at the last count (Strait & Strait, 1988), have MIA black flags at them.¹⁰⁹ Such flags are flown regularly with the 'stars and stripes' at veterans' hospitals and events. The point of the flag is not that (as the Rambo film implies) there are U.S. soldiers left alive in Vietnam but rather that there are bodies left unrecovered.¹¹⁰ Thus, in a nation which always recovers its dead and has over four hundred service personnel in four international bases, including Hanoi, and the largest anthropology laboratory in the world, all dedicated to recovering the bodies of its soldiers,¹¹¹ then the cultural psychology of unrecovered bodies represents 'unfinished business' for the U.S. public, and unresolved PSTs for their families.

This was further complicated by the Mai La and other war atrocities that were reported. Society too felt guilty later for neglecting the returning soldiers and for the hostility it fostered on individuals who were for the most part conscripts. The film '*Rambo – First Blood*' deals with this issue in a profound way. The violence in the film is a direction of the anger felt by both the alienated soldier and by the Sheriff, representing small town U.S. society, who cannot accept him and simply wants him to disappear. This accurately reflects an inability to make a post-war transition for both characters. The film which was (sadly) tarnished by silly sequels¹¹² found a resonance with the U.S. public.

Parkes (1998) suggests that PSTs consume time, energy and spirit because they affect the altered internal world. They influence both thought and action, to some degree

¹⁰⁹ MIA: Missing in Action. Soldiers believed to have been left behind in Vietnam at the end of hostilities.

¹¹⁰ Cawthorne (2008) suggests that American people probably were left behind in Vietnam after U.S. forces withdrew.

¹¹¹ Joint Prisoner of War, Missing in Action, Accounting Command. Website: <http://www.jpac.pacom.mil/>, sighted 10th October 2008.

¹¹² Orion Pictures (1982).

affecting the personality and sense of self, at least in part, in relation to the people and the situations around us. Nonetheless, many psychologists argue that PST is a process that has to be passed through if adaption to the requirements of the real world is to be met (Kauffman, 2002; Parkes, 1998; Stroebe *et al*, 2006). As presented by these authors, this model is extremely prescriptive and functions to inform the experience. I argue, conversely, that experience should be the origin for interpreting the grief situation. This model however, does seem to accurately reflect some of the experiences of American society during and after the Vietnam conflict years, as well as individuals, including Luttrell, dealing with a changing and very difficult experience of loss and grief over a number of years subsequently.

The internalisation of change, due to intense grieving, makes it very difficult for the person concerned to step aside from the disorganisation and clearly define what has been lost and what remains. Society's pressures and ambiguity, as we have seen, only make this process more difficult.

Since, as Parkes puts it, *'we rely on having an accurate assumptive world to keep us safe. People who have lost this world model feel very unsafe'* (Parkes, 2006 (b): 95) and fear, anxiety and depression cloud judgement and impair reflection and concentration. Attempts to utilize memory and make sense of situations become inadequate. Making a PST seems to be primarily about retelling our internal stories in any number of ways and it is this process, as argued in the last chapter and later in this one that defines a functioning of the objects at the Wall in terms of a continued narrative and a continuing bond.

This is not to suggest that the individuals concerned are helpless; even when levels of anxiety become inhibitive people have been found to have coping mechanisms that allow them to reduce the levels of tension and pain. Often they withdraw from the world or shut themselves away, restricting themselves to a core of trusted friends and

avoiding situations and chains of thought that bring conflict between internal and external worlds (Stroebe *et al*, 2006: 95). The worse the situation is, the more likely that the bereaved deploy a full range of psychological isolation in order to protect themselves, something that finds evidence in Laurent's book (1999) and Luttrell's story. In the case of many veterans this process could take decades due to complicated and conflicted personal stories, reflecting a society still repressing the trauma of the war.¹¹³

I would suggest that the letters, photographs and objects left at the Wall are functions of our internal stories. They operate as both chapter endings and beginnings, and allow us to engage with our past in a positive and safe way (Gunaratnam & Oliviere, 2009). I would further suggest that they act as bonds or bridges between internal and external worlds, as Parkes has described it, but from within the complexity of a continuing bonds framework (Klass *et al*, 1996). The objects are not just about release from pain or trauma but functional links (or bonds) that can connect us to the loss, or situations of bereavement and allow us, in a controlled way, to re-engage and reorder the process of loss and pain.

¹¹³ Linda Blum deals with this issue from a contemporary context in 'Outlook: Still a Long Way from Home: Vignettes of Iraq Veterans' Post-Traumatic Stress, Washington Post, 30th June 2008.



The Photograph

It might be argued that Luttrell's photograph functions as a bridge between his assumed external world and his own internal world within Parkes' construct. It is his way of retaining some control over his history, trauma and loss. It is his way of managing the memories and emotions and, to some degree, his own identity, as revealed in the narrative of the documentary. The photograph is more than a linking article. It is a talismanic object that communicates as much about Luttrell as it does about Lunn, the soldier whom he killed.¹¹⁴ Luttrell finds it difficult to give up the photograph (he needs to release it formally twice), because it is a continuing bond with his past, the man he is now and, possibly, the person he may become. The photograph itself is in a sense a teleogenic plot, as is his letter being released at the Wall.

Applying the PST model to Luttrell's experience of loss brings home that using the Wall in this way may not be as comforting as it appears. For, even though it may involve recovering a continuing bond, in doing so it would still require an acceptance that things need to change. Change can be difficult for a person who is undergoing loss, as they are, by definition, trying to recover something precious and this will often be resisted. This may be, at least in part, why it is not uncommon for Veterans to take many years to visit, or deposit objects at the Wall. Luttrell is a useful case in point. In addition, as noted by Parkes, it may be dangerous and often unnecessary to discard old models of understanding when the whole process of change may require a questioning dynamic

¹¹⁴ I was given Lunn's name by a research worker at the MARS repository. I have been unable to confirm it but have chosen to use it in this research as a mark of respect for the dignity of the dead man.

that might, ultimately, restore many of the old structures in an affirmed position within a continued narrative (Stroebe *et al*, 2006).

Parkes also points out that there are benefits to temporarily refusing to change. It gives people time to adjust to the new situation and to consider the implications of a new existence. This is as true for a society dealing with transition as it is for individuals. For a time this is fine, but eventually it becomes dangerous to continue to resist change or fail to adapt. To initiate 'recovery', Parkes (Parkes, 2006 (b): 96) suggests that three things are necessary: emotional support, protection during the vulnerable stages of grief, and help with re-orientating to emerging new models of understanding and relationship. The first two of these processes need to be complete before one can safely engage with the third. If this is the case, then the lack of support for bereavement provided for Vietnam veterans and their families may explain something of why these groups and U.S. society more generally have taken so long to recover.¹¹⁵

Parkes proposes that many of the problems associated with PSTs can be mitigated by appropriate counselling and a sound knowledge of risk factors involved (2006 (b): 98). Whilst this may be true, Parkes fails to address two immediate issues: first, Stanley Stylianos and Mary Vachon (2006), researching the role of support in bereavement,¹¹⁶ clearly identify the importance of friendship circles over that of established counselling services in early stage bereavement, which has clear relevance to the research found in the first chapter of this couplet. Laurent (1999) has also shown us the importance of specific support from the veteran community. This has significance in Luttrell's case because of his use of the Wall and its obvious connection with the Vietnam War community in America, for the first depositing of the photograph and letter. He then develops the need to go back to Lunn's community to deposit the photograph again within that community. In Luttrell's case he is not drawing support from these communities as much as looking for forgiveness and addressing his own narrative.

¹¹⁵ Durante's (2002) novel is a case in point.

¹¹⁶ Stylianos and Vachon, (2006: 397-410 but most significantly 403).

According to Parkes, progression through a PST can best be delivered via a range of sources, according to individual need. Paul Rosenblatt (2006: 102-111) deals at length with the role of objects and meaning, exploring how 'things' or 'objects' play a very important role in addressing 'story' in a flexible dynamic within the bereavement process. He suggests that people use household objects and particularly photographs when undergoing significant loss, to define their place in the world and their relationships to other people and society generally. Rosenblatt further claims that objects serve as reminders of the definitions that were maintained in relationship with the person now lost and in a search for new meanings that take the loss into account. This view has very clear support from Miller (2008), Gibson (2008) and Csikzentmihalyi and Rochberg-Hatton (1999), as we have seen in previous chapters. There is in this representation a very clear bearing on the way Luttrell is using the photograph of the little girl and her father.

Within Luttrell's photograph there are a number of different stories and narratives invested:

(a) Luttrell brutally kills his first man when still a teenager, a man who had the opportunity to kill Luttrell but chose not to. The consequent feelings of guilt, self-doubt and loss of personal identity are revealed in relation to this action in the text that follows. In taking the photograph from Lunn's dead body, Luttrell's self-disgust is evident if unspoken. Luttrell describes the picture of the little girl as both a mystery (he is unaware of her identity) and a focus for sadness and loss, which he identifies in her face. At this early stage the picture has already become a 'linking object'. Luttrell is very clear in the early text that the impact of the picture was significant for him at a point of extreme trauma in his life. It is noteworthy that after this point Luttrell describes how he became a very proficient killer; he never describes himself as a good soldier.

(b) Post-war, Luttrell describes forming ‘a bond with the little girl’. He invests the horror of his war experiences and loss in direct contrast to the innocence of the little girl’s face. He clearly describes carrying an immense amount of guilt within that bond. Despite his wife’s insistence that he removes it, he continues to carry it for the next twenty years. Given that the photograph was in Luttrell’s wallet, not on open view, this is indirect evidence of the effect it was having on the Luttrells’ relationship and the power that had become invested within it. The photograph had arguably become a link between Luttrell’s internal emotional and assumed world and his external functioning world (a PST) as well as a continuing (and changing) bond with the dead man, Lunn, and other loss incurred in the war including, significantly, Luttrell’s former sense of self.

(c) Eventually Luttrell deposits the photograph at the Wall in what is, to both him and his wife, a very significant event. The two strong and clearly expressed emotions, both in the text and in the letter that he deposits with the photograph, are guilt and sorrow expressed to Lunn, his daughter and perhaps to Luttrell himself as well. He needs to publish his request for forgiveness, even given that Lunn, at least, cannot provide it – he is dead. The fact that Luttrell does this at the Wall, a memorial for 58,272 war dead is significant, as we will see later; the Wall provides a place where the living and the dead meet. The depositing of the photograph here is evidence of both a continuing bond and also a significant emotional release.

The Letter

The letter is clearly teleogenic in that it is situated in its own immediate time frame and then moves backwards and forwards, touching on significant events and memories. Despite defending the war and his part in it, Luttrell asks for forgiveness from the dead

Vietnamese soldier as he will of Lunn's daughter when he returns the photograph. He also expresses the pain, guilt and sense of loss, I would infer, 'of self', that so many other Vietnam veterans have suffered. Although only one paragraph long, this letter stands with those which precede it in previous chapters. But in this instance the letter is a very good example of an object that is also a narrative, which fits within larger accounts. These include the documentary and that of Luttrell's, Felton's and his wife's experiences of loss as a result of the Vietnam war and their need to maintain a bond with those they have lost, as well as find some form of release.

In this regard Luttrell's story and, I would suggest, loss and grief can be explored in terms of their narrative reconstruction.

'The chief symbolic method that these authors identify is that of narrative reconstruction of biography and self identity, so that a sense of meaning and purpose in life is restored. The stories of sufferers, to be effective, are told "through" rather than "about" the body, suggesting an underlying notion similar to that of catharsis or discharge' (Seale, 2003: 26).

Seale, citing Frank, identifies three broad forms of narrative, the first of which is a 'restoration narrative' that involves 'narrative surrender' to a discourse premised on the hope of cure. Narratives of chaos, recording despair and a loss of control and hope, are also told, and he emphasises the need to listen to these too, since they can convert into preferred 'quest narrative'. By telling such stories, converting them into a form of testimony, people can help others understand their own suffering. This contributes to an ethical position consonant with postmodern sensibilities, where trust in grand narratives has declined (Frank, 1995: 27). A myriad of small, personal externalisations can be briefly objectified in the form of confessional books, for example, and can then be internalised by other sufferers as material for their own biographical reconstructions.

In the case of the Wall, this takes the form of letters and notes left in the full knowledge that they will be recorded, stored and read.

Luttrell's letter, as well as his photograph and the extraordinary journey over time, space and place to return it, can be seen as evolving from the first of the examples Seale suggests, to the second and finally to the third.

Seale then addresses a linked subject which also has a direct bearing on Luttrell's story, 'Talk and visual narrative as ritual':

'A ritual is a pattern of behaviour, performed at appropriate times, involving the use of symbols. Participation in ritual, in conventional anthropological usage, affirms membership of the collective and through symbolic manipulation places the life of the individual within a much broader, sometimes cosmic, interpretative framework. That is why it is possible to conceive of ritual as a healing process, in that through "narrative surrender" to the healer's story (or actions in depositing an object – author's insert) the life of the sufferer is given a larger meaning and purpose, so that order is restored and the authority of culture over nature is re-established. A cathartic emotional discharge may be experienced by participants' (Seale, 2003: 29).

Hockey (Hallam & Hockey, 2001) suggests that formal rituals may be experienced as unhelpful and even oppressive by particular individuals. This may be the case, but this observation does not threaten the function of ritual itself. Luckman (Berger & Luckman, 1971) points out that those objectifications, including recovery rituals and those associated with loss, have a life of their own and in this we must include the events at the Wall as well as, in this case, in Vietnam.

Seale also suggests that rituals involve rules of conduct about how to behave towards sacred things. Sacred in the context of the Wall, as I have suggested in previous chapters, means spiritual rather than simply 'religious', as evidenced by the wide range of objects and experiences there:

'Rituals allow individuals to feel that their environment is peopled with majestic and benevolent forces. The root of this is our common social bondThere is therefore no such thing as a purely individual religion; even the late modern religion of individualism is a profoundly collective aspiration.

The 'deference-emotion system' relies on non-verbal bodily communication and emotions. These systems generate the emotion of pride in social bonds that are intact, and shame those that are broken, explaining our sense of moral failure when insufficient care has been shown towards others' (Seale, 2003: 30).

Key descriptors of Luttrell's larger story within and without his letter, include his ambiguous relationship with the war, the army, his country, his wife, the photograph and, as the previous chapter has indicated, most significantly, himself.

Seale addresses this ambiguity in a much wider context.

'Here then is a place for narrative reconstruction in the context of a much broader theory of the elemental bonds of social life, that avoids the trap of repeating Western mythologies of individualism and avoids over romanticised versions of subjectivity.' (Seale, 2003: 31)

He claims that conversation (in very different forms) taken as a social institution in which participants may draw upon a variety of available cultural scripts, serves as a micro-ritual for the substance and renewal of a secure narrative of self-identity (Seale, 2003: 193). This perspective has very real relevance, not only to Luttrell in his action of passing over an object, but in his and the receiving community's understanding of events from a spiritual and healing perspective.

Grief and loss of identity, or sense of self, as it is conventionally understood in survivor theories, has been understood as a reaction to extreme damage to the social bond (Seale, 2003). In Freud's view, to love someone is to place in that person a part of one's self, so that when that person dies so does that part of the self. The death of a loved one then is linked to the damage of a secure sense of self. Mourning practices, whether they be the mortuary rites of tribal and traditional societies or the micro-interactions of grieving individuals, are often (though not always) helpful in resurrecting the ontological security of mourners. The resurrection of the dead, usually experienced as a theme of organised religion, can in late modernity be understood as a resurrection of hope in survivors about continuing in life (Parkes, 2006; Seale, 2003: 192-196). For Vietnam veterans and the society which ostracised them this is a double-edged sword. Extreme violence during the conflict and a divided and fractious society complicates this sense of continuance; despite the end of the war, there is no peace but a search for release and a re-established continuing bond of normality.

Ghosts

It is noteworthy that the commentator in the NBC program felt it was acceptable to comment on the belief structure of the Vietnamese family receiving the photograph, even if he attributes the comments to one member of the family concerned. Death in Vietnam was, for Americans, mainly a soldier's death, as evidenced by both the statues at the Wall and the list of names, all (save nine female Nurses) are male soldiers.¹¹⁷ Although, in official terms, the same might be said of the Vietnamese, in reality, death in the Vietnam-American war was virtually anyone's death for the Vietnamese: young, old, male, female, combatant, partisan, communist or anti-communist. The frontiers of the battlefield in Vietnam were abominably unclear (Kwon, 2009: 14). This is important because ghosts (the dead) in Vietnam do not take sides nor are they considered as enemies or friends; they may have issues to resolve but they are essentially neutral.

Ghosts in contemporary Vietnam do not have a coherent existence. They dwell in the cultural habitat of memory and the realm of the ancestors. This habitat exists within the wider, modern, secular and political society that negates their existence. The ghosts of war, therefore, face a strong disciplinary force that strives to remove their traces from the spirituality of secular life.

Adjusting to this, the Vietnamese take on two distinct behavioural patterns in relation to commemoration. When dealing with the rituals of their ancestors, they are gracious and fluid, weaving a linking pattern between the ghosts, their ancestors and the corporeal world. When at formal remembrance services they are stiff and military in bearing. Kwon speaks of senior officials in Vietnam moving from state formal speeches based upon duty and the collective good to an evening watch to engage with errant spirits in their home town or village (Kwon, 2008: 25).

¹¹⁷ This generic term includes Naval, Air Force and Marine personnel

The eminent Vietnamese poet Pham Duy wrote a poem/song called 'Unknown Soldiers'.

*In the daylight, the sight of a troop appears in the distance
 The mountain trees are quiet to listen to the heroes
 The echo of their drum thunders the quiet hill in the dusk
 In a dreadful afternoon, go to the foggy front
 Numerous spirits of dead gather and talk in the voice of the wind
 These are the dead unknown, Vietnamese soldiers who remember the
 enemy
 Leaving home, they promise to fight for the motherland
 Keeping the tradition of struggle against the foreign invaders
 With the hallowed memory of their blood
 Their bodies are scattered everywhere, one on top of the other building a
 wall
 In the dusk, their ghosts come and go like swallows
 These are the *Chin si vo danh*¹¹⁸ (Cited in Kwon, 2009: 26)*

The concept of the fallen soldiers wandering (or weaving) between the two worlds is found in American families of the war dead (Duarte, 2002), as it is in Vietnam. Duarte's novel '*Let Their Spirits Dance*' portrays the mother of a deceased Vietnam veteran who hears an inner call to make a journey to the Vietnam Memorial Wall as her own death approaches. Alicia Ramirez makes a promise to reach the Wall to touch her son's name and honour his memory. Her promise sets into motion an invisible dimension that links her family to the history of the Mexicas, ancestors of the ancient Aztec Nation.

Interspersed with flashbacks of their life in Arizona in the late 1960's through to the 1980's, is the story of a family's illuminated journey to Washington, D.C. Along the way,

¹¹⁸ Although this is how the title is spelt in Kwon's book, the Vietnamese term for the 'lost Soldiers' (Ghosts) is '*Chien Si Vo Danh*' found in various online dictionaries and confirmed by UWIC's translation service.

the cross-country trip becomes a time of discovery and healing, especially for the main character, Teresa, the recently divorced, school teacher, daughter who feels the loss of her older brother almost as deeply as her mother does. Duarte represents the Wall as a meeting point between parallel universes, and a link between the living and the dead in a very literal way. *Let Their Spirits Dance* spins threads, which connect family, friends and an entire nation with the names on the Vietnam Memorial Wall. Duarte's book, an American best seller, paints the Wall as a touchstone to the dead, a talismanic and literal 'linking object' through which not only families and friends find healing but the spirits of the dead soldiers can be brought home and in that, find peace. During the writing of Duarte's novel she went to Vietnam once and to the Wall seven times in order 'to check with the guys that I was getting it right'.¹¹⁹

Duarte freely admits that she hears the men speaking to her. The very fact that her work is so popular signals a widespread acceptance of the mixed spirituality of the Wall in linking the living and the dead. This is clearly picked up in the blurb for her book:

'Stella Pope Duarte's stunning debut novel portrays a family struggling with the universal scars suffered by all who have been touched by death through war. With this novel, Pope Duarte connects family, friends, and an entire nation with the names on the Wall, while honouring the men and women who served in Vietnam, and those left behind who watched and waited, but never forgot'.

The key themes of unity and recovery, which are fundamental to the structure of her book, coupled with the notion of wandering spirits in a disunited nation, finds an exact parallel with Kwon's research in Vietnam.

¹¹⁹ Found at Duarte's website www.stellapopeduarte.com, sighted 30th August 2010.

The rendering of national unity does not exist in the horizon of ghosts. Ghosts in Vietnam constitute a highly heterogeneous society and there is a related element of social diversity in the spirit existence. Married to this is an individual spirit memory (Ky uc) which holds the concept that transition to death, or another life, brings with it a subtle and partial corporeal amnesia. There is an old Vietnamese saying '*there is no enmity in the cemetery*' (Kwon, 2009: 27), which, as we have seen in the previous chapter, is a corporate function of the Wall.

This powerful interaction between the ghosts and the social world has a direct relationship with the materiality of the living environment with which they interact. The material culture of their former lives and current form of existence is a continuum. In short, they haunt people, places and things.

This verse, in various forms is used as an incantation or prayer across South East Asia:

Those who died beheaded

Those who had many friends and relatives but died lonely

Mandarins

Those who died in the battlefield

Those whose death nobody knew about

Students who died on the way back from an exam

Those who were buried hurriedly with no coffin and no clothing

Those who died at sea under a thunderstorm

Merchants

Those who died with a shoulder hardened by too many bamboo poles

carried on it

Innocent souls who died in prison

*All spirits in the bush, in the stream, in the shadow, underneath the
bridge, outside the pagoda, in the market, in the empty rice field, on the
sand dune*

You are cold and you are in fear

You move together, young ones holding the old

We offer you this rice porridge and fruit nectar

Do not fear

Come and receive our offering

We pray for you, we pray. (Anon)

The prayer/poem introduces a multitude of displaced and wandering spirits of the dead, and these beings appear as close companions to the living in their arduous journey of life. The intimacy between humans and ghosts speaks of a reciprocal relationship of sympathy between the displaced spirits of the dead, and the living person coming to terms with their own loss. The poem produces strong evidence of continuing bonds between the living and dead, though from the Vietnamese perspective this is initiated by both sides and required by the dead. The bonding action is requisite on the living, they pray and call to the dead; they present incense and fruit offerings and perform ritual religious obligations. They enshrine, record and honour. This is not just the 'troublesome spirits being put to rest', it is deeper than that. There is an incredible beauty in these poems and prayers that speaks of obvious respect and love. Like the widows letters' seen in a previous chapter, these actions signal that the dead are being included and cared for by the living. They are wanted, honoured and loved. The bond continues (Kwon, 2008 : 87-89).

What is also significant in these actions is the centrality of the material in these events. The ghosts are encapsulated into the landscape if they are lost, and into a continued family (via a shrine), if they are not. They infest temples, battlefields, huts, forests, people and photographs. If they have no clothing when they die they are cold and lack

dignity, so they haunt. Physical objects and terrain are the medium of contact between the living and the dead. Just as the Wall performs this 'interface' action for the American vets, the interface for the Vietnamese is also real and solid but far more dynamic and flexible. The bonding action between the living and the dead is, I would argue, the same in both cultures.

Ghosts are outsiders to the familiar, idealised home in which people are identified with their side of the ancestral memory. This identification appropriates the place as an exclusive home for the genealogical unity. The ghosts, however, become insiders to a deeper originality of the place once people move away from their genealogically-instituted home, toward the wider horizon of the geological home.¹²⁰

The thirst of the dead is a material phenomenon. The human soul in Vietnamese understanding consists of both *hon*, the spiritual soul, and *via*, the material soul. Because of this duality, the spirit of the dead can feel cold or hungry through its material soul and transform this to self-sympathy or anger through its spiritual identity. Likewise, the experience of physical pain, in the case of violent war death, can remain in the material soul of the dead and its spiritual counterpart may try to think of (or action) ways to relieve this. These pains are real whether the death the body experienced was in a good cause or not. There is no ethical judgement, as such, in the spiritual world. The choice to infest a photograph or person is about achieving a material aim, not revenge (Kwon, 2008: 106).

Significant amongst the objects left at the Wall attributed to Vietnam veterans are alcohol bottles and cans (Allen, 1995), which forms another parallel with the Vietnamese experience. The bottles, together with a large number of drugs frequently found at the Wall, are a form of continuing narrative and relationship. They are active links to the dead, the past, and to a place where personal identity was forged into a unit

¹²⁰ For an example of this idealised concept of founded place, see Hardy (2003: 23-8).

identity with, as we have seen in the first chapter of this couplet, both positive and negative effects. They may not be consciously left for the dead to use in America but, nonetheless, perform a similar 'linking' or 'bonding' function in direct relation to the Vietnamese rituals.

A Vietnamese soldier-ghost who is on his spiritual journey home does not normally create problems for the elders or the surviving members of his or her family. The body to which his spirit imports its material soul in the form of an illness is typical (Kwon, 2008). In this case the spirit can communicate with both cognitive and linguistic fluency in the corporate world. If, however, the focus of the spirit's pain, which needs expression, cannot be voiced, as in Luttrell's case, because he did not understand either the process of haunting or the language being used, then the spirit would need to use other means to achieve its end. Therefore to the Vietnamese family, Luttrell is not an enemy or someone to be hated; he is the chosen vessel, with the photograph, to bring the father's spirit home to his daughter and village.

For the soldier's family, if not for Luttrell, the trauma is not a result of post traumatic stress disorder, or a need to function a continuing bond through a psycho social transition. It is simply the spirit's need to communicate its desire to find its way home, something which it can only achieve through Luttrell. For Luttrell not only killed Lan's father, but also took the photograph, thus giving the spirit the opportunity to move into Luttrell's life in order to act upon its need to return home. The short period that the photograph was retained within the MARS collection and its (unique) return to Luttrell, only serves to reinforce this notion of a material-based, continuing bond between ghost, family, photograph and carrier (Luttrell).¹²¹

¹²¹ Colin Cotterill (2010) has written a complete series of detective books based in Laos, 1976, which is entirely focused on post-war ghosts possessing both people and things, for which he won the 2009 CWA 'Dagger'.

Kwon (2009) gives the whole of chapter seven of his book to the celebrations held across Vietnam into the seventh Lunar month festival for wandering spirits. This celebration involves the depositing of money or the burning of money as a gift for the guiding spirits who, it is hoped, will guide the wandering spirits home again. The money in this event might be seen as a transitional object. It shows respect whilst enabling the spirit to move to a better place frequently linked to home. The money, once dedicated or claimed by the spirit, is never touched again, hence the burning, or the spirit will possess the profaner. There is a very obvious link here to Luttrell's photograph. The Vietnamese officer was dead but his personal equipment and items immediately became transitional and talismanic objects in that they formed a bridge between the spirit world and the physical world. This process is not dissimilar to a linking object between the living and the dead in terms of psycho social transition (Parkes, 1998; Volkan, 1981). One perspective may be based in a psychological understanding and the other in a spiritual (although as Duarte has shown us, this is not a fixed differentiation even in the case of the Wall). Nonetheless, in both cases, there are clear, shared understandings of the role of objects, links to an assumed world and the nature of continuing bonds in direct relation to the Vietnam War and its personal and social consequences.

Couplet Summary

This research argues that the Wall plays a multifaceted role in U.S. society, with political, cultural and personal expressions of loss, grief and anger articulated there. At its heart, though, are the Vietnam conflict and the men and women who served there. The most emotionally powerful of the many gifts left at the Wall come from these veterans. On the basis of the research in these two chapters, there appears to be a common experience at the Wall; one which expresses many different forms of loss, including significantly, loss of self, and reveals significant emotional investment in objects

deposited there. I have argued that these are not simply 'linking' or 'transitional' objects but evidence of a bridge between what Parkes describes as an internal and external assumed world. Their use by the veterans and the ongoing ritual of depositing them (over many decades, and still a daily occurrence), is also strongly evocative of a structured continuing bond and a need to reconnect to the people, time and self that have been lost in the violence and trauma of the war.

Parkes, in a personal interview with the author was convinced of the power of 'attachments' in trauma, particularly with reference to the Wall. He gave me examples of very differing understandings of attachment, explaining that these loose attachments are fundamental to bereavement. He also emphasised that the said attachments are multifaceted and assumed; not necessarily related to Bowlby's theory; and often they find their home in objects. In his home, Parkes has an original drawing of Queen Victoria who is viewed in a chair, dressed in black, helplessly weeping with her head in her lap; drawn one year after her widowhood, by Princess Alice. The point Parkes was making is that Victoria sat for the picture. She was creating an object (an image of grief) that set a bereavement model for her children and for posterity and she chose to leave it with her daughter. In this, Victoria was participating in the 'assumptive' world that Parkes has highlighted. She was also investing in the object (painting) that linked her inner grief to her outward expression of that pain and loss. The object had become a part of her story, Albert's story, their children's story, her society's story and perhaps in the context of this research, now my story. In this, both 'continuing bonds' and 'psycho social transition' are self-evident.

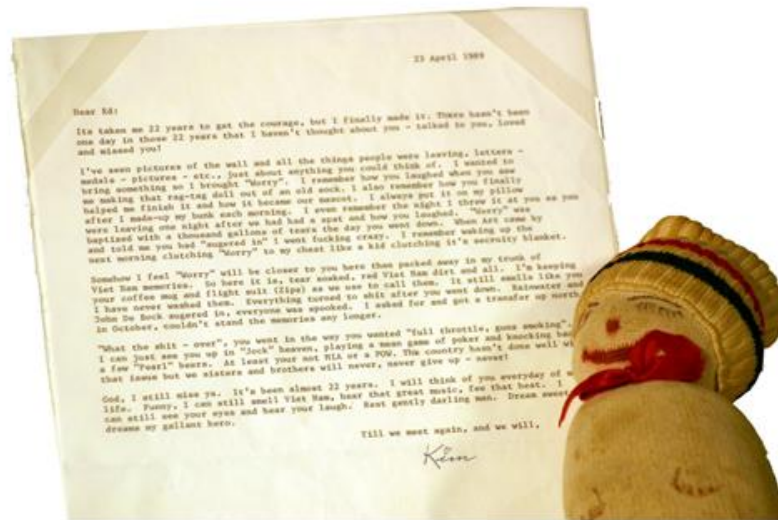


Figure 10: Letter with Sock Doll. MARS Collection
(Claudio Vazquez: Turner Publishing)

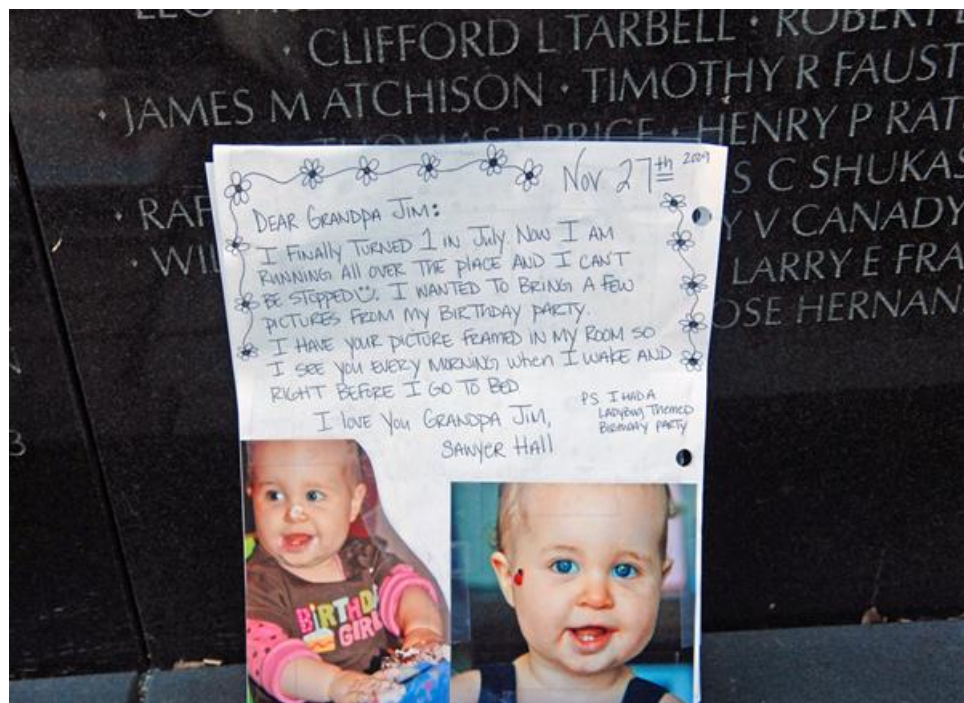


Figure 11: Letter in situ



**Figure 12: Marine Combat Items. MARS Collection
(Claudio Vazquez: Turner Publishing)**



**Figure 13: Combat Webbing.
MARS Collection (Claudio
Vazquez: Turner Publishing)**



Figure 14: The Wall in Autumn
Showing signs of the large numbers of visitors



Figure 15: Battlefield Memorial (Vietnam Veterans' Memorial)



THE RIFLE-AND-HELMET SYMBOLS OF DEATH IN BATTLE MARK A FALLEN COMRADE CEREMONY FOR THE MARINES OF C COMPANY. ON THE BACK OF THE PHOTO, TWO OF THE FALLEN ARE NAMED. THE THIRD IS SIMPLY CALLED "NEW GUY," KILLED BEFORE HIS COMRADES LEARNED HIS NAME.



Figure 16: Photographs of a Marine Remembrance Service in Vietnam & Contrasting Marine Tiger Cage Memorial
MARS Collection (page reproduction from Allen, 1995: 234)



Figure 17: Boots (Daniel Arant: Vietnam Veterans' Memorial)



**Figure 18: Veteran at the Wall
(Peter Marlow: Vietnam Veterans' Memorial)**



**Figure 19: Vietnam War Memorial Stamp and Plate:
Computer generated from photograph
(Vietnam Veterans' Memorial)**



Figure 20: 9th 'Aircav' Hat. MARS Collection
(Claudio Vazquez: Turner Publishing)



Figure 21: 7th Air Cavalry Veterans

CHAPTER EIGHT

Cultural and Political Users at the Wall

This couplet of chapters will explore the impact of the Wall on the way American culture has responded to the bereavement and loss experienced there in the years since the Wall's inception. It will use cultural icons including letters, literature, film media and various objects left at the Wall. By examining the role played by the Wall for certain groups of individuals today, this study will draw attention to the way attitudes and assumptions about the Vietnam War have changed and evolved in the decades since the Wall's construction. A central focus will be the national narrative and the sometimes conflicted cultural identity found at the Wall, including the narrative's political implications and potential for manipulation. Key to this understanding is the way that the Wall has been used for political purposes since its construction; an understanding of which is essential in comprehending the socio-cultural landscape of grief and loss encountered there. Developing this context, the chapters will explore the use of the AIDS quilt, which found its genesis in the Wall, and other specific objects placed there by individuals in managing loss and grief in this, at times conflicted site.

American political culture is frequently portrayed as one suffering from amnesia, and it has been suggested that the media are compliant in the (alleged) ease with which the U.S. public forget important political facts. However, Sturken (1997: 2)¹²² suggests that this view is superficial and instead proposes that American society is replete with cultural memory and narratives, which define the cultural foundations that characterize the nation:

'This culture of mourning and melancholy has converged with the concepts of healing and closure that are central to American national

¹²² Professor of Visual Culture at New York University.

identity. American mythology clings tenaciously to the belief that one can always heal, move on, and place the past in its proper context, and do so quickly. The memorial culture in the United States has been largely experienced as a therapeutic culture, in which particular citizens, primarily veterans and their families have been coming to terms with the past and making peace with difficult memories. This is the primary narrative generated by the Vietnam Veterans Memorial' (Sturken, 2007: 14).

Sturken's argument is pervasive and relevant, but stems from a very narrow and conventional view of what happens at the Wall, centred upon her discipline of visual culture. She significantly fails to engage with the four million visitors a year, the 150,000 stored objects left at the Wall, or the continued weekly use of the Wall in television, films and books. She further fails to acknowledge the central role the memorial has come to play in the nation's life.¹²³

Americans frequently use visual stimuli to interact with cultural elements perceived as representative of their nation, particularly in events related to trauma, where both the structures and fractures of a culture are exposed.¹²⁴ A strong visual culture, defined in this case by the Wall and its associated objects, allows oppositional politics and engagement with nationalism in a safe environment. National and personal narratives are conceived, challenged and changed by the ideologies represented, and perhaps by what happens, at the Wall.

Cultural narrative and story are produced through objects, images and representations. These modes of recall and description are not singular or passive in their function. They are vehicles through which memories and reflections are shared, produced and find meaning. An object or an image provides a representation of the past or present that

¹²³ My bibliography reveals five new books centred upon the Wall published in the last five years.

¹²⁴ Hass (1998), Schulzinger (2006) and Sturken (1997, 2007) all address this issue from different perspectives.

may open a fissure between the memory of the event and the experience of seeing the image (Huysen, 1995). It is this juxtaposition that can produce the opportunity for the individual to change their position or view of the events and allow political pressure or argument an opportunity to manipulate or even dominate the experience.¹²⁵

'The trend of the past two decades has produced at least two memorials in Washington D.C., the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the U.S. Holocaust Museum, that has shifted the emphasis to an honouring of Survivors in ways that have radically resituated the politics of cultural memory...

After the bombing Oklahoma City quickly became the focus of an urge to memorialise. This initially took the form of people bringing objects to leave at shrines that were created at the periphery of the space cordoned off by the emergency personnel. Since the construction of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in 1982 there has been a national focus – filtered through the media and other forms of commentary, including academic scrutiny – on the kinds of rituals that individuals participate in as a means to confront trauma and loss and to intervene into public narratives of national events.

The small, individual acts of leaving objects, notes or flowers for a person, which have been practiced outside of the national arena for many decades at cemeteries or roadside shrines, became an aspect of national culture when visitors began to leave things at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial as a means of speaking to the dead. These gestures became a central part of the media coverage and coffee table books generated by the memorial' (Sturken, 2007: 104 - 105).

¹²⁵ The altered image in the Vietnam Memorial postage stamp provides a case in point.

Sturken identifies a significant change in American cultural reaction to national trauma post-Vietnam, but she does not define how this loss is represented in psychological or sociological terms. She does note the need for the expression of grief and the route for that expression, but as with other authors writing about what happens at the Wall, such as Hass (1998), she does not explore how individual and national narratives of loss are expressed and processed. Yet this communal process, seated at the heart of national power is one of essential individual and group empowerment, focused through the process of being able to share both personal and corporate pain and loss in the face of the ruling political process.

Through the sharing of stories, experiences and memory at the Wall and at the AIDS quilt, individuals participate in giving meaning to the past and present (Niemeyer, 2007). Although the quilt travels across America, it can be said to embody a location, site and an image and in this it is often perceived as a place where the survivors can find and speak to the dead (Sturken, 2007). At the same time, the Vietnam War Memorial (Wall) symbolises the location of the nation's identity and narrative of the war. The Wall too, travels around America in the form of three 'mini Walls' that house all the names inscribed on the larger Wall and spend single days in various towns and cities. The Wall is also a place where the living and dead meet, and the mobile Wall is frequently used for the 'Reading of Names' ceremonies, where all of the names are read by relays of readers.¹²⁶ Both attest to the fact that continuing bonds and shared stories can be located in specific places or objects.

It is evidence of the complexity of U.S. culture that bereavement and loss narratives are produced not only at memorials but also through commodities. Theodor Adorno¹²⁷ suggests that specific and important objects could be 'hollowed out' and become

¹²⁶ For a description of the tours of the mini Wall(s), see the Vietnam Memorial website <http://www.vvmf.org/>, sighted 7th November 2010.

¹²⁷ Cited in: Terdiman, R., 1993. *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis*. Ithaca. Cornell University Press. : 12-13

containers of specific meaning and, as I have previously argued, they also become possible fulcrums in the expression of bereavement and loss by visitors to the Wall. Significantly, Adorno also suggests that the objects can be imbued with any meaning. In Western society, commercialization and marketing are pervasive; it should not be surprising to find that the emotional investment into inanimate objects in a material culture is not only common but also open to political inflection.

When people participate in rituals and deposit objects at the Wall, they do so both in opposition to and in concert with a concept of the nation (Sturken, 1997). This peaceful¹²⁸ tension allows individuals to collectively uphold history. The traditional 'Wall' icons; its metaphors, objects, bonding rituals and narratives provide a structure for a collective consciousness or national subjectivity. Lauren Berlant (1991) suggests that this profoundly affects the citizen's subjective experience of their political views, but perhaps their political right to those views as well.

The process and rituals at the Wall and in the associated National Mall provide a means for establishing, questioning and redefining the definition of what it might mean to be an American. The AIDS quilt performs just such a function. It was laid out in the symbolic heart of the nation, the Mall, touching the Lincoln memorial, the Washington Memorial and the Wall from which it drew much of its inspiration (see Figure 23).

The NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt, often abbreviated to AIDS memorial quilt, is an enormous quilt made as a memorial to, and celebration of, the lives of people who have died of AIDS-related causes. Weighing an estimated 54 tons, as of 2010, it is the largest piece of community folk art in the world. The idea for the NAMES Project Memorial Quilt was conceived in 1985 by AIDS activist Cleve Jones during the candlelight march, in remembrance of the 1978 assassination of San Francisco Mayor George Moscone. For the march, Jones asked people to write the names of loved ones whom they have lost to

¹²⁸ Both pro-war activists and pacifists meet at and use the Wall. The MARS collection is staffed by curators who hold both views without rancour or division.

AIDS-related causes on signs that would be taped to the San Francisco Federal Building. All the signs taped to the building looked like an enormous patchwork quilt to Jones.

Thus, the project was initiated in 1985 in San Francisco by Jones, Mike Smith, and volunteers Larkin Mayo and Gary Yuschalk. At that time, many people who died of AIDS-related causes were not given funerals, due to both the social stigma of AIDS felt by surviving family members and the refusal by many funeral homes and cemeteries to handle the deceased's remains (Laderman, 2003: 198). Lacking a memorial service or a grave site (as found with the MIA's in relation to the Wall), the Quilt was often the only opportunity survivors had to remember and celebrate their loved ones' lives. The Quilt was first publicly shown in 1987 on the National Mall in Washington, DC where it was displayed in full in 1996 in contact with the Vietnam War Memorial.

Each panel is a three foot by six foot rectangle, approximately the size of the average grave; deliberately chosen to link the concepts of AIDS and death more closely. The goal of the Quilt is manifold: it raises awareness as to the size of the AIDS pandemic, it brings support and healing to those affected by it, and it further allows a medium for the expression of individual loss in a traumatic situation.¹²⁹

Typically very personalized, individual quilt panels are created by the loved ones of someone who has died of AIDS-related causes. The panels are donated to The 'NAMES Project Foundation' where they are joined with other similar panels and assembled into 12' by 12' sections, called 'blocks'. These blocks, containing 8 individual panels, can be seen at local displays of The Quilt. Techniques used in making panels include patchwork, appliqué, embroidery, fabric painting, collage, spray paint and needlepoint.

Items and materials used in the panels range from fabrics, lace, suede, leather, mink, taffeta; to Bubble Wrap and other kinds of plastic and even metal. Items of clothing are

¹²⁹ Details of the design can be found at <http://www.aidsquilt.org/>, sighted 23rd October 2010.

also used, such as jeans, T-shirts, gloves, boots, hats, uniforms, jackets, or flip-flops. Items of a personal nature, such as human hair, cremation ashes, wedding rings, merit badges and other awards, and car keys also decorate the panels. Unusual items, for example, stuffed animals, records, jockstraps, condoms and bowling balls are also not uncommon decorations. The NAMES Project¹³⁰ was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize in 1989 (Sturken, 1997).

The quilt evokes a sense of American-ness, yet also represents those who have been symbolically excluded from American mainstream society – blacks, prisoners, gay men, or drug users. The Washington Mall is at the heart of white stone national monuments to greatness and success with the noticeable exception of the Wall, which, in contrast, is black and represents a ‘lost’ war. It is also the primary location of national protest. The Wall is deeply symbolic in its presence on the Mall; it is a safe place to deposit objects of patriotism and protest, hurt and love. The Quilt takes its lead and its permission from this precedent.

Sadly in recent years Jones and the Names Foundation have found themselves in a legal battle not just about the location of the quilt (Atlanta currently) but also the changing symbolism and purpose of the memorial. The Foundation recognises that the social nature of the HIV infection has changed over time to reflect a more ‘accepting’ approach to the condition and a more generalised focus of ‘loss’, whereas Jones, and others, maintain that the quilt is essentially a radical political object about protest and rights. I suspect that both views are true and that the quilt like the Wall is a dynamic object subject to change over time and individual interpretation¹³¹.

Both the Vietnam War and the AIDS epidemic are markers of what it means to be American at significant points in history. Both disrupted previously held and nearly universally accepted beliefs about America. Both have altered the country’s image

¹³⁰ The title of the quilt project clearly references the Wall.

¹³¹ New York Times 31st January 2007 offers a very balanced view of the arguments.

nationally and internationally. The impact of both these events will fade over time, yet some thirty-five years after the end of the Vietnam War, the Wall is still the most visited war memorial in the world, the MARS repository is receiving as many objects as ever – some 150,000 to date – and the AIDS quilt is continuing to grow. The stories, narratives and deeply needed and held continuing bonds, are ingrained in national American consciousness; such powerful expressions of personal and national identities are not only subject to political interpretation and usage but also to the possibility of profound personal change.

The Wall and the Politics of Loss

As Vietnam veterans struggled with a variety of physical, social and psychological wounds in the years following the war, the American public began to invest in a movement to honour them. A widespread public perception that the U.S. government and American society in general, had both ignored and mistreated their war veterans led to the construction of the Vietnam War memorial in Washington. The Wall quickly became a ‘sacred’ (Savage, 2009) site where veterans and non-veterans alike came together to heal the wounds of the war. In the immediate post war years, veterans found a range of venues to give expression to their memories, loss, pain and (current) beliefs about their wartime experiences (Schulzinger, 2006). Their expressions helped to shape a new public consensus that now honoured the service of veterans, sympathised with their situations and struggles, but remained deeply divided about the wisdom of American involvement in the conflict.

From its inception, the creators of the memorial consciously sought to avoid the political and cultural controversies that had nearly torn the country apart in the war years (Scruggs & Swerdlow, 1992). They recruited prominent figures from both pro and anti war fractions to endorse the concept of the memorial as a place of healing and

remembrance, without commenting on the war itself and maintaining a form of neutrality (Scott, 2004). In 1980, congress approved the construction of the Wall. Republican Senator Charles Matthias, the sponsor of the senate, responsible for appropriation for the memorial land, emphasized that *'for all Americans this memorial will express the spirit of reconciliation and reunion that preserves us as a nation. Today, Vietnam is now far enough in the past that we can hopefully look to the reconciliation of the country after the divisions caused by the war'*.¹³²

The consensus did not last long. Controversy erupted as soon a Lin was identified as the design winner in October 1981 (Lin, 2000; 2006). Conservative opponents complained that Lin's design pressed the agenda for the opponents of the war as it had no statue, flag or plaque. There were resignations from the planning committee and Ross Perot organised opposition for the planned development (Schulzinger, 2006). Interior Secretary Watt shared some of the conservative objections. He was unable to cease the initiative to build the Wall entirely, as by now it had gathered significant support from the U.S. public. He did, however, insist that another traditional representation should be erected alongside the memorial. The Wall was only permitted if the statue of three U.S. soldiers by Fredrick Heart were constructed next to it (Scott, 2004).

The committee from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund responsible for organising the building reluctantly agreed. The Statue and Flag (now also added) were to be placed about 30 meters from the Wall. This was useful to Lin, who was able to distance the new structures from her own. Two years after the Wall's construction, the new Statue of the three soldiers – Caucasian, Hispanic and African American – was unveiled. The figures are larger than life, muscular, but also clearly exhausted. They emerge from the mall tree line and stare at the Wall as though transfixed by its power, as indeed are the thousands of visitors to the Wall each day (Scott, 2004). This accommodation between the extremes came to symbolise what the Wall stood for at its inception, permitted it to

¹³² Public Papers of the President of the United States, Jimmy Carter, 24th May – 26th September, 1980. U.S. Government printing Office 1981, 1270-71.

become a safe and important place, an object which accepted all – regardless of their position or attitude toward the history of the conflict.

At the memorial's opening day on November 11th 1982, one veteran carried a placard which read:

I am a Vietnam Veteran

I like the memorial

And if it makes it more difficult to send people to battle again

I like it even more (Lopes, 1987: 110).

His views were not untypical and almost as soon as the site was opened visitors began treating it as a shrine or a sacred space (Savage, 2009; Murphy, 2007). The relationship between the public and the monument was immense and immediate. People began to take rubbings of the names on the Wall, so not just bringing a linking object to the Wall, but also taking one away with them. People left letters that were difficult and painful to read, many of which clearly had teleogenic plot narratives of grief and loss (Sofarelli, 2006; Palmer, 1988). Many of the visitors stopped at the directories to get the panel numbers and position of loved ones in an almost ritual repetition of the process encountered at Parish churches or cemeteries.

The power of the highly reflected polished granite was immediately noticed. One veteran said, '*You see the names, but you see yourself, too, and that makes you part of it*' (Schulzinger, 2006: 100), a position also reflected in Teter's famous painting of visitors meeting the dead at the Wall¹³³. There were many very positive comments, as depicted by one woman saying, '*I think it is one of the most referential places that I have ever been*'. But there were also negative comments left in letters; one man wrote, '*I could not understand why it has taken so long for the Government to do something like this for the families*' (Schulzinger, 2006: 100-101). The shame was, of course, that the U.S.

¹³³ See Figure 6

Government had not built the Wall at all, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund Committee had. The U.S. Senate just sanctioned and controlled it. Most of the letters deposited were simple messages of love and expressions of personal pain and loss (Sofarelli, 2006). Over time, the nature of the letters, as we have seen in the Widow's chapter couplet, was to change.

Some of those original letters left at the Wall were also political; Schulzinger (2006: 101) reports that one mother wrote, *'The war changed me for life, forever. I don't think it was a fair war. I believed that if it had been a declared war a lot of our sons would be home today'*. Stacy Goodman wrote in more personal, yet very conflicted, terms of losing her relationship to her husband because of Vietnam:

*It Is The Lion
That Screams In Your Soul
It Is That Which You Talk Of
You Cannot Speak Of.*

*Not Of This World
The Nam' Lives Inside
You Got Out
But Did You Survive?*

*You Are My Vietnam
Dangerous and Exciting
Emotional and Traumatic...*

*Hollow Is the Heart
That Can No Longer Hear
Its Own Tears*

Bloods spurts from Your Mind

The Bodies of Your Brethren

Awaken

In The Night

Echoes and Cries

'There Are Too Many'

'No. No. Don't'

'Look Out'

'Fuck'

Words Mumbled

As You Sleep

Lover, I Know

I Can Not Go

Where You Have Gone

Heart Hardened

Constant Reminders

Don't Cry – Don't Cry

No Longer Cries

But Weeps Silently Alone.

Emotions

In A Body Bag

Lie

Pain

Unrecognised

And The Lion Roars

Screaming Now

In my Soul...

(For R.F. I will love you forever) Stacey Goodman.

(Sofarelli, 2006: 118)

Along with Stacey's letter is a drawing in pencil of a veteran. She is a very talented artist, and the soldier – her husband – has a shadow from his helmet cast upon his face. He only has one visible eye and that is very small and edged in black. He is clearly lost in darkness and from that darkness he looks straight out at the reader. The letter was weighted by what looks like the remains of a grenade fragment (Sofarelli, 2006: 118).

The Park Service had expected flowers and arranged for volunteers to collect any rubbish, but there were none. Pam West, the manager of the MARS Federal Archive suggested that the Park Service recognised almost immediately that people were far too engaged with the Wall to do any damage or littering. It had almost immediate sanctity. They also quickly recognised that visitors were bringing objects, which the Park Service termed 'Offerings'. Although there were many letters and heart rendering notes attached to specific items,¹³⁴ simple objects with no obvious narrative quickly came to dominate. Items, such as Flags, boots, hats, military jackets, guns, drugs, letters, photographs, high heeled shoes and wedding rings were frequently left at the Wall (Hass, 1998).

In a very short time it became normal, or even expected, that visitors would leave something at the Wall. Schools would prepare projects to deposit items, Scout troops and the veterans PTSD programs organised visits to the Wall. Despite this wide public ownership, the contentious and conflicted views about the war continued to find a home at the site. A Marine leaving a wedding ring at the Wall wrote, *'this wedding ring belonged to a Viet Cong fighter. He was killed by a Marine unit in the Phu Loc province*

¹³⁴ Interview between Pam West and the author, February 2009. Pam was a Peace campaigner during the Vietnam War. She retired from her position as Head of the MARS complex in October 2009.

of South Vietnam in May 1968. I wish I knew more about this young man. I have carried this ring for 18 years and it's time to lay it down'.¹³⁵

The deposited objects were left in a direct relationship to the Wall; it became a central place in the recollection of the war and its effects on American society, almost a site of pilgrimage. The purpose inherent in Lin's design – that of allowing and promoting the visitors' thoughts, memories and mixed emotions – found a very powerful fulfilment. The Wall itself was, arguably, the single biggest 'linking object' between the living and the dead, and for anyone who felt a sense of loss in relationship to the conflict, however expressed.

In an attempt to maintain the integrity of the Wall as a place for all Americans, the Park Service banned public demonstrations at the Wall, allowing approved remembrance ceremonies only. However, there have been several breaches of the rule. Senator Paul Wellstone had a news conference held at the Wall in 1991 to decry the first Gulf War. President George H Bush made it clear that the memory of the Vietnam War would not stop his administration's ability to engage in military force abroad. He visited a platform with George McGovern at the Wall for the ceremony of the Reading of the Names in 1992. McGovern was a prominent opponent of the war in Vietnam, which is significant considering that the following speaker, a serving U.S. general, claimed that in light of the cold war, the Vietnam War should not be seen as a defeat (Hagopian, 2009). His view was shared by Nigel Cawthorne (2008), a British journalist for the 'Times' newspaper in his new history of the conflict.

The Wall inspired the creation of hundreds of other Vietnam memorials across the United States. Taking their lead from the planning committee for the Wall, other memorial committees sought to protect the memory of the veterans from the politics of the conflict. The inspiration of Lin's design was echoed in other memorials, made of

¹³⁵ Schulzinger (2006: 101-102). Note the similarities to Cottrell's object.

black polished stone, often inscribed with the names of local dead. Figures in random positions take their inspiration from the statue of the three soldiers at the memorial site. Some memorials even have full sized 'Huey' helicopters suspended above them (Hagopian, 2009). Despite military connotation of some memorials, all seek reconciliation over militarism and state sponsored remembrance. Whilst all these memorials brought a sense of healing and reconciliation and a form of acceptance to some, many continued to engender feelings of remorse and bitterness (Scott, 2004).

The divisions between those who served and those who did not remained, and may have even grown in intensity. James Fallows, a journalist, wrote, '*My fears of getting shot were naive. If physical safety had been my only concern, I could have aimed for a safe, college-boy berth in the military*' (Fallows, 1981: 126). Fallows, like many politicians, wondered if he were less of a man for not having served and whether he had missed something important in not having done so. His readers were not impressed by the fact that these considerations were not manifested until after the war had ended. Instead of healing the wounds of the Vietnam War, these statements from former opponents of direct involvement in the conflict, seemed to many to be self-serving. Fallows later admitted that he regretted both his stance on this issue and his post-war comments (Fallows, 1981).

There may be some justification in the 'manhood' argument about having missed the war, but the near civil war that took place in the United States over the conflict would indicate that these conflicted emotions have a deeper structure (Maraniss 2004).¹³⁶ The representation of the Vietnam War Veteran in America has certainly had many negative connotations, as we have seen in previous chapters. Nonetheless, the veterans are a respected minority now, as represented in the revised visual image in the 'Wall' postage stamp; a fact also recognised by the role of the Wall in U.S. society and the four million annual visitors. This sense of belonging to a respected, if potentially very hurt, minority

¹³⁶ David Maraniss's book '*They Marched into Sunlight*' (2004) paints a vivid picture of a society fighting one war in South East Asia and another at home in America.

that has found a sense of belonging, is very attractive (Kauffman, 2002; Laurent, 1999). The objects deposited by Americans at the Wall provide a link with the past as well as a direction for moving forward. They disestablish some aspects of a negative past by conversely creating a link between the internal experiences and the external world in a psycho social transitional function (Kauffman, 2002). The objects (and the Wall itself) function as a medium for releasing tension and a little of the trauma in the memories of the users of the Wall. But at the same time, they are linking objects (again including the Wall), that establish a continuing bond with the loss of innocence, of national identity and with the loss of people in the conflict. The continuing bond is a validation of the positive and negative in the past, a possible reordering, acceptance and incorporation of that past into the present in lives of individuals and their society.

This bonding activity (Unruh, 1983) and need to self-narrate was not limited to the Wall. Walter Capps, a professor of religious studies, taught the earliest course on the Vietnam War at the University of California, Santa Barbara in the 1970s and '80s. Invited veterans poured out their personal experiences to the rapt class. Capp's theme for his course was 'how values are transmitted within the contexts of highly volatile social and political change' (Schulzinger, 2006: 107). The course enrolled more than a thousand students annually and was covered by CBS in its *Sixty Minutes documentary*.¹³⁷ The tension in the classroom was on occasions intense and needed careful monitoring. Veterans retold narratives and stories about induction, training, combat, loss, death, coming home and trying to recover who they were (or reconciling who they had become). Schulzinger (2006: 107) suggests that the memories and after effects of the war formed the significant events for two decades of the veterans lives.

Many of the courses would pair a veteran who hated the war with one who had found the war a positive experience. A disillusioned veteran might present slides showing the changes in appearance during his twelve month combat tour. His first slide would

¹³⁷ A record of the educational materials and programs related to the conflict can be found in the Vietnam online archive <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/general/#center>, sighted 29th October 2010.

present a clean, shaven and neat soldier who was smiling. Subsequent slides would show a rapid deterioration in his appearance and condition. The last slide showed a ragged and bearded, sloped man and a shadow of his former self (Schulzinger 2006). Veterans who were scarred by the war often spoke of years of loneliness and depression afterwards, including rejection or lack of interest from friends and family about what they had experienced during the conflict. Talking to the class was always considered positive by the veterans; they needed to share their stories. Positive narratives from the war might include Bob Hope shows, and leave in Australia or Hong Kong.

After 1994, veterans were allowed to visit Vietnam directly from the United States, which was reciprocated by one million Vietnamese who had entered the United States over recent years.¹³⁸ Motives amongst the veterans were mixed; some just wanted to revisit old sites, some wanted to try to make amends for their actions or try to re-find children they had fathered. As Major General Moore and his 7th Air Cavalry veterans found, the reception was warm and forgiving (Galloway & Moore, 2008). Many returning veterans noted that the visit brought about the psychological healing they had sought for years.¹³⁹

Veterans' enthusiastic reception of the various Vietnam War memorials and the positive affirmation they received there and in Vietnam, the reconsideration of the Vietnam War-era experience from those who served in the conflict and those who did not, the need for veterans to tell and re-tell their stories and their willingness to revisit their battlefields, all helped to foster an emerging and positive, if still conflicted, consensus about the veterans and the war. Many had come to terms with their own service and the fact that much of the American public would never see them in the same light as the World War II veterans. By the beginning of the 21st century, the Vietnam Veterans were no longer considered villains who had promoted and fought in an immoral and illegal war. Many of the newer generation, who were born after the conflict had ended, began

¹³⁸ Migration Policy Institute: <http://www.migrationinformation.org/index.cfm>, sighted 29th October 2010.

¹³⁹ Author interview with Duery Felton, Curator, MARS Collection, Maryland U.S.A. 24th February 2010.

to see them as victims of wartime incompetence, political immorality and public indifference. Veterans were increasingly perceived as people who needed to heal. This change enabled the veterans to be seen as autonomous human beings and it also helped to create a sense that the emotional wounds of the Vietnam War were scarring (Schulzinger, 2006: 109). Whilst this view is justified, as shown by many of the narratives around the objects and the letters left at the Wall, some of the wounds are still deeply infected.

The Wall and Vietnam as a Cultural Screen

For a short while after the war, the Vietnam veteran became shorthand for the maladjusted or violent psychopath, as depicted in *Taxi Driver* (1976) or *Birdy* (1984), where Hollywood took a voyeur's look at the Vietnam War through the eyes of a veteran driving across America with the dead body of his friend. As we have seen, this Hollywood perception inspired by many Americans' view of the vets helped to motivate the construction of the Wall.

The stock view of the veteran in Police shows, such as *Kojack* and *CJ Hooker*, became common, with *Magnum PI* as an exception. This concept of unstable veterans became even more engrained by the characters in the *A-Team*, which, although a partial comedy mocking service in Vietnam, nonetheless portrayed the main characters as fundamentally damaged. In 1977, Hollywood portrayed the war as a world war two style conflict in *The Boys in Company C*. Then, in 1978, Jane Fonda, parading her anti-war credentials, joined John Voight in *Coming Home*, a story of a bitter disabled veteran who falls in love with the wife of a serving Marine, which won Oscars for best Actor and Actress as well as best Screenplay.

The following year saw the release of *Go Tell the Spartans* and *Who'll Stop the Rain*, which portrayed the war as fundamentally corrupt and the soldiers as drug-using heroin smugglers. Again in 1978, the third Vietnam War film was completed, portraying the Vietnam conflict both in America and Vietnam in an uncompromisingly culturally relevant and sensitive light – Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter*. Justly criticised for the portrayal of the North Vietnamese as vicious and callous, the film was starkly relevant. It revealed the effects of the war on a blue collar, mining society overwhelmed by the violence and lack of political justification for the damage done to all the characters in different ways. This presented a sophisticated exploration of the cost of war and painted the characters in the film as flawed, but not sick or evil people. For the first time, Americans saw their countrymen (not characterised) in the context of the conflict. This was the film that Scruggs claims helped to inspire the Wall (Scruggs & Swerdlow, 1992).

The film also won three Oscars but, perhaps more importantly; it was also the first production that won the approval of many veterans. The following year, Coppola spent \$31 million on *Apocalypse Now*, a visually brilliant transposition of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The movie took a long time to make and is regarded by many as a visual fantasy. The narrative is a function for a series of nightmare scenes, some of which found relevance for the veterans. It provides a set of almost unrelated sub-narratives held together by the journey on the river that the lead characters make. It is a significant film from the perspective of the present study, as the fragmented nature of the memory-like sequences find (I would argue) a relationship to O'Brien's work in 'The Things They Carried' (1991). This book, in turn, as I have shown both in terms of narrative and object, has a functional relationship to the objects deposited at the Wall. The film is also immensely political. It does not so much question American policy in Vietnam, as present it as an impossible, or even insane, narrative of power and abuse.

Later, in 1986, Stone made *Platoon*, which cost \$ 7 million and took eleven weeks. The film showed a patrol from the 'Grunts' perspective and was a realistic view of what had happened to some units. Although the film did not shy away from atrocities, gang rape and murder, it showed many positive and even noble actions of some of the soldiers deployed. *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) looked at the mental conditioning that the U.S. Marines used to prepare recruits to become 'killers' on command. It was a useful tool in that it allowed people who had never served to see and understand the process that had formed many who served in the conflict. The final scene in which U.S. Marines fighting in the 'Tet' offensive spontaneously sing a Disney theme is a telling insight into American Kitsch culture, which stands in brutal contrast to the actions just witnessed (Sturken, 1997). The film is perhaps asking how will these men return and adapt to life in America.

The last (and arguably) most significant film to be produced and reviewed here is again by Coppola. *Gardens of Stone* is set in Arlington National Cemetery and is an adult look at both the soldiers' and U.S. society's reaction and response to the Vietnam War. The film's narrative, based upon the experiences of senior combat NCO, is an interwoven tale of conflicting beliefs, ethics and values, but most of all, 'loss', death and its justification and the politics behind it are displayed from a 'ground roots' level. The film does not seek to answer questions; but by utilising the gravestones (arguably in the same way that the Wall is used), asks some very pertinent ones. The film reveals a set of internally conflicted characters, and in this, they reflect the conflict found in American society at this point. As shown, this conflict finds a powerful linkage and relationship to the Wall, and the objects used and left there.

The visual nature and representation of the history and popular (changing) understanding of the war must, I would argue, have an effect on the use of the Wall in terms of popular culture as well as its political and controversial role as a national icon. Monuments are generally not built to commemorate defeats; the defeated dead are

remembered in memorials. A monument signifies victory; a memorial might refer to the life or lives sacrificed to a specific set of values. Whatever triumph a memorial may refer to, its description of victory is always tempered by a foreground of the lives lost. Memorials seek to instruct posterity about the past, and in so doing, make a declaration about what is worth recovering. Memorials tend to emphasise specific texts or lists of the dead, whereas monuments offer less explanation. A memorial may seem to demand the naming of the dead, whereas monuments are typically anonymous. The paradox of the Wall is that the men and women killed and missing would not have been memorialised had they won the war and erected a monument instead (Sturken, 1997). The American people, however, are not used to losing and this significant role in memorialisation and in reconciling national doubt and regret (or lack thereof) is profoundly more complex than simply recording the names of the dead.

American culture is also a significant factor in using the Wall. As already alluded to by Hass, the role of objects at the Wall is significant in that the dominant political orthodoxy does not use the Wall in this way. But the objects and the Wall itself most certainly do have political and other roles in the post-war trauma of American culture. Laurent's chapter specifically shows examples of political isolation, repression, grief and loss in terms of national and personal identity represented in the objects at the Wall. The veterans' objects serve a similar purpose in using the Wall as a metaphorical portal to their past and the widows' letters also identify a complex and unresolved understanding of the role of the Wall in American culture. Films such as *'In Country'* with Emily Lloyd and Bruce Willis are centred on the Wall and represent all of these issues through the narrative. The reasons for the Wall to be used in this way are complex and open ended.

The Healing Wall

'What is really fascinating about monument building in this city is that in almost every case, whether the final product resulted from a competition or a commission, certain clear divisions occur: professional standards versus popular taste, modernity versus tradition, abstract symbolism versus realist representation. The results have been mixed... if the debate over Lin's earth hugging design reflects a time honoured pattern it is, if anything, more intense because the subject itself is so difficult and so close in time.' Washington Post, 17th July, 1982.¹⁴⁰

This newspaper report from the time of the Wall construction is telling. It reflects both the standard arguments related to a new building but implicitly exposes the unhealed wounds of the Vietnam War and its ongoing consequences. When this piece was written, the Wall had yet to gain its hold over the American psyche and yet the 'unhealed' America was already present.

The healing wound metaphor that has prevailed in descriptions of the Wall since its construction is clearly a 'body' allegory (Sturken, 1997). It evokes the many different bodies, the Vietnam War dead, the bodies (and minds) of the veterans, as well as the body of the American public. The healing that the Wall promotes comes in many forms – tears, memorialisation, releasing, re-bonding and depositing of significant objects. The Wall itself remains the single unifying object. The 'healing' metaphor suggests that the body (America) is fragmented or broken; thus the political and social use of the Wall may signify the recovery or 'reuniting' of American society as well as individuals. This may go some way to explain its immense popularity. The following two quotes from the Washington Post evidence the enormity of what happens at the Wall in differing ways:

¹⁴⁰ Washington Post 17th July 1982 found at <http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/washingtonpost/advancedsearch.html>, sighted 7th November 2010.

'It's a memorial that does not force or dictate how you should feel. It asks and provokes you to think whatever you should think. In that sense, it's very Eastern – It wants you to... come to your own resolution'.¹⁴¹

'We walked through the usual litter of a construction site, and gradually the long walls of the memorial came into view. Nothing I had heard or written had prepared me for that moment. I could not speak. I wept.

There are the names. The names. The names are etched in white on polished black marble. The names are arranged chronologically by the date of death, running from July 1959 to May 1975.

This memorial has a pile drivers impact. No politics. No recriminations. Nothing of vain glory either. For 20 years I have contended that these men died in a cause as noble as any cause for which a war was ever waged. Others have contended...that these dead were uselessly sacrificed in a no win war...never mind. The memorial carries a message for all ages: this is what war is all about.

On this sunny Friday morning, the black walls mirrored the clouds of summer's ending and reflected the leaves of an autumn beginning and the names – the names – were etched enduringly upon the sky'.¹⁴²

The second very emotional piece is significant because of the obvious pain felt by the reporter, the significance of the neutrality of the Wall and the immediate, almost physical, reaction to seeing the names reflected in the sky.

The chronological 'roll call' of names on the Wall describes the broken bodies of the dead inscribed permanently. Family, friends and strangers alike will seek out the names and form a new or continuing bond with them. Families will use the Wall as a grave

¹⁴¹ Washington Post 3rd January 1982 found at <http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/washingtonpost/advancedsearch.html>, sighted 7th November 2010.

¹⁴² Washington Post 21st September 1982 found at <http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/washingtonpost/advancedsearch.html>, sighted 7th November 2010.

marker, a place to meet their lost relative, or as we have seen with Stacy Goodman's poem, and with many of the veterans themselves, a place to commemorate the men that have been lost, even if they are not dead (Palmer, 1988).

Sturken (2007) suggests that the capability of modern weapons to disintegrate bodies and the impossibility of separating the remains of those who died in a single explosion, coupled with controversies such as the 'Vietnam Unknown Warrior',¹⁴³ has left the status of the bodies of the war dead highly problematic, as seen in some of the letters from the Widows chapter. Michael Herr, reporting from Vietnam (1978: 112) wrote:

'People would get just get ripped up in the worst ways there, and things were always on fire. Far up the road that skirted the TOC was a dump where they burned the gear and uniforms that nobody needed any more. On top of the pile I saw a flak jacket so torn up that no one would ever want it again. On the back, its owner had listed the months he had served in Vietnam. March, April, May, (each month written in a tentative, spidery hand), June, July, August, September, October, November, December, January, February, the list ended right there like a clock stopped by a bullet.¹⁴⁴ A jeep pulled up to the dump and a Marine jumped out carrying a bunched up fatigue jacket held away from him. He looked very serious and scared. Some guy in his company, some guy he didn't even know, had been blown away right next to him, all over him. He held the fatigues up and I believed him. "I guess you couldn't wash them, could you?", I said. He really looked like he was going to cry as he threw them into the dump. "Man", he said, "you could take and scrub those fatigues for over a million years and it would never happen".'

¹⁴³ For details, see Arlington National Cemetery Website <http://arlingtoncemetery.net/vietnam.html>, sighted 27th November 2010.

¹⁴⁴ Service time for Army personnel in Vietnam was set at one year, which makes this reference significant.

This reference is important, as it very powerfully shows the physical nature of the war in Vietnam and the possible status of remains sent home, as well as how specific objects play a mediating role in processing the trauma and loss experienced at the front line and at home in America.¹⁴⁵ The bodies in Vietnam frequently become subject to alienation, they were no longer counted or perceived as real. They become masked to allow those left to survive. The absent and returned bodies are interned onto the surface of the Wall. In a sense, the Wall becomes them and that is what gives the Wall its popular, sacred nature. The Wall is not so much a linking object as Volkan (1981) would claim, but a portal that recaptures those who have been literally 'lost'.¹⁴⁶

This metaphor is relevant to both the direct bereavement from the war and also with regard to the near civil war and consequent loss of innocence in sixties' America. The U.S. Army was not the only 'body' that was hurt by the conflict. The nation itself was seriously harmed as well. In this respect, healing requires both an investigation and exploration of the causes and consequences of both individual and collective narratives of the War. It may also demand a foreclosing and atonement for neglect, or actions taken. It needs a focus and centre that promotes this action and allows the difficult questions to be asked and, perhaps, answered. In this respect, the Wall and the objects placed there provide such a function and potential national bonding activity (Unruh, 1983), which cannot fail to serve a 'political' function.

The Wall as Political Shrine

The Wall has become an essential and extraordinary site for the outpouring of emotions related to loss and hurt since its construction. An estimated 150,000 people attended its opening (Murphy, 2007) and according to the Park service, the site receives up to four million visitors a year. It has been argued that the Wall operates as a sacred shrine comparable to Lourdes or the Western Wall in Jerusalem (Savage, 2009; Sturken, 2007).

¹⁴⁵ O'Brien's (1991) work is also significant in this regard.

¹⁴⁶ See Teter's painting (Figure 6).

Whereas Lourdes has its medals, candles and statues, and the Western Wall its prayers left in the stone joins, the Wall has its secular objects reflecting a much stronger material culture. The need to engage with the Wall as a cultural symbol reveals not only the relief of telling a history, and personal stories that have been repressed or censored (Laurent, 1999), but a desire to reinterpret the past and promote a safe release and re-bonding with that history.

The Wall is a neutral, reflective place (both physically and symbolically); it invites differing projections and a variety of interpretations and narratives from those who engage with it (Appy, 2008). To the veterans, the Wall permits a sense of identity and some form of resolution, as well as an implicit acknowledgement of their treatment (Scott, 2004). To the families, the Wall provides an opportunity to grieve, tell their stories, say hello and goodbye. It may also be the only real gravestone many of them have; and above all, it allows individual rituals of grief and loss and a place for pilgrimage (Schulzinger, 2006). For other user groups the Wall is a site for challenging the perception of power and official sanction. It enables the questioning of preconceived social norms and allows the validation of grief (as in the AIDS quilt), which otherwise might not find expression. It is also a literal political site, still used on occasion by presidents and politicians to make speeches, despite the sanctions against doing so. It is, above all, a neutral place to meet, question and to change one's position. It significantly acts as a profound anti-war statement, or equally, an opportunity to recast the narrative of the war in terms of honour, sacrifice and dignity (Sturken, 2007). As we have seen with the images on the postage stamp, often it does both.

The popularity of the Wall – in terms of its status with visitors, television and filmmakers and researchers – has to be seen from the perspective of a re-telling and reinterpreting of the Vietnam conflict, which has formed a very strong cultural relationship between the Wall and the American public (Sturken, 2007). Because of the popularity of the Wall, there is a significant nostalgia industry now in place, which finds

representation in television series' such, as NCIS, the Hollywood films of recovery as well as of the war.¹⁴⁷ This extends to the hawkers who surround the Wall in summer selling Vietnam era U.S. Army badges, patches and trinkets, which also now find their way to the Wall's collection at MARS.

The ownership of the Wall has taken on many different forms. There are those who fought the war, those like Herr (1978) and Galloway (2008) who reported it, and the female nurses whose intense recollections prompted the Women's Memorial (Kent, 1995). The media generally felt that they had a significant purpose in reporting and exposing the 'real' stories of the war, which the military and political establishment attempted to hide (Scott, 2004; Sturken, 2007). Finally there are the politicians and the political activists who use the Wall, often quite legitimately, as a fulcrum for change.

In the MARS collection and amongst the photographs in Allen's book (1995: 119) is a very powerful political statement deliberately formed as an object to be stored and perhaps shown? The offering left at the Wall as part of the Gay & Lesbian Pride Day held on June 14th 1987 in Washington D.C. is a black 'tricon' flag with a pink triangular insert (Figure 24). There is a small pink representation of the Wall at the top and the inscription reads *'In memory of the gay soldiers in Vietnam: Made heroes for fighting other men, shamed for loving other men'*. The tricon shape is deliberately representative of the tricon American national flag given to the relatives of dead soldiers upon their interment at Arlington National Cemetery. The black colour, as opposed to the national flag, picks up the theme of sacrifice without recognition. The pink triangular insert is a reproduction of the patch that gay men were made to wear on their chest when interned in Nazi concentration camps, and is particularly clever in that it is inverted to the Tricon flag, as though a part of it as well as in opposition to it. The object is a significant political statement left and collected at the Wall without damage, and comes just a few years before the United States Army adopted the 'Don't Ask –

¹⁴⁷ As we have seen, the film *'In Country'* was entirely based upon a family trip to the Wall to recover their sense of self, as was Durante's novel (2002).

Don't Tell' mandate that prevented Service Officers asking enlisted personnel about their sexuality¹⁴⁸. This policy in itself is controversial, as it remains illegal for gay soldiers to serve in the U.S. forces; however, no one is allowed to question a soldier's sexuality, so no action can be taken on the grounds of homosexuality. It is another example of a contested narrative found at the Wall, reflecting and challenging social and cultural mores. It is also an example of the ongoing political importance and power of this iconic structure.

The Wall is the subject of seventeen books, listed in this bibliography, many of which are visual images of the Wall and the objects deposited there. Most of the books focus on the interaction between the living and the dead, seen through the deposited objects. They obliquely reference the need for continuing a bond with the past that is public, visible and tangible. Private grief thus becomes a public and a political statement through material culture. The Wall's engagement with the living and the dead either in regard to the veterans or the American public, has led to the site being considered a 'living memorial' (Murphy, 2007). It is unique in this respect; no other site in Washington D.C. is used for the depositing of artefacts.

This uniqueness has led to the Wall becoming the primary site of remembrance for the Vietnam conflict, as well as a significant arena for public protests and events. Artefacts covering the abortion debate, gay rights, the Gulf and Afghan wars, and even animal rights, have been deposited at the Wall.¹⁴⁹ The role of the Wall is significant then, not only with regard to the Vietnam War, but for a wide range of American national issues and events since the war. It is a testimony to the Wall's malleability as an icon that can contain conflicting opinions, stories and deeply held beliefs (Sturken, 2007). The depositing of the objects, to be archived, at the Wall is evidence of an active participation in the narrative and life of American society. It is a direct contribution to

¹⁴⁸ This legislation was repealed from statute in July 2011 (implementation 20th September 2011) which from that date grants equality in US forces personnel in terms of their sexuality.

¹⁴⁹ Seen in research visit to MARS 2010.

the nation's history and is evidence of a society that is engaged with healing the trauma of the Vietnam War years and attempting to resolve deep political and social issues.

Summary

As we have seen here and in previous chapters, the veterans and other user groups of the Wall require a degree of conclusion to some of the war narratives. This raises a number of issues. For some veterans there is an inability to 'let go', but for others (veterans and other groups) there is a sense of resolution, not closure (Laurent, 1999). Others have shown that narratives found at the Wall have chapter endings rather than completions. Grief and loss find expression there; including anger, shame and betrayal, although for different reasons. But, what seems to be common with regard to engaging with the Wall is that both veterans and others continue a bond, but express a transition.

The ownership of the changing narratives of the Vietnam War Memorial is conflicted and subject to the politics of memory. This has been the case since its conception and still remains. The Wall functions to permit all to speak about their experience of war, and, as the Aids Quit has shown, loss and grief in the wider context. The Wall facilitated the emergence of the voices of veterans, families, friends, war protestors and minority groups that, arguably, sit in opposition to the media and government. Certainly, as the Hollywood films have shown, it has facilitated the development of a challenging and changing narrative.

Sturken (1997; 2007) suggests that the Wall, at least in part, achieves this, as it acts as a screen that allows the projections of narratives and stories to be played out. The Wall, of course, does not endorse any of the conflicted narratives deposited there, but significantly it does allow and promote expression of those narratives. The (honoured) names on the Wall, and the implicit condemnation implied, has allowed the Wall to function as a catalyst for rewriting, and retelling the pain, loss and hurt of the war in a

safe and open environment. Within this structure, 'healing' and reconsideration of the war has been both allowed and encouraged to develop, which has led to different and sometimes conflicted arguments and resolutions about the Wall to be achieved. This process has not led to direct conflict, but to a mutually held respect from differing users of the Wall, even when the parties are diametrically opposed, as we will see in the next chapter.

Laurent Berlant wrote:

'When Americans make the pilgrimage to Washington they are trying to grasp the nation in its totality. Yet the totality of the nation in its capital city is a jumble of historical modalities, a transitional space between local and national cultures, private and public property, archaic and living artefacts... It is a place of national mediation, where a variety of nationally inflected media come into visible and sometimes incommensurate contact' (Berlant, 1991: 395).

Berlant's words can be applied, not only to the capital city, but also to the Wall's construction and use.

The Wall is both a compliant and resistant object. It serves as a point for meditation and mediation, as well as for conflicting voices and opposing agendas. The multiplicity of meanings implicit in the Wall and in the function of depositing objects there does not subject the memorial to devaluation. Rather, it provides a place, sacred to some, that is accepting and open, and where the users' emotional responses to awful situations find acceptance and value. Here, people are safe to grieve, cry and express their anger. The Wall sits in the centre of these conflicted narratives and, to some degree, sanctions them.

CHAPTER NINE

A Political Story: Coppin

Introduction

This chapter, the second in the 'Politics' couplet, will explore how a singular, national, political narrative can be interwoven into personal post-war stories. Through developing themes found in Laurent's story and Cottrell's photograph, it will explore how grief and loss narratives can be invested in objects – in this case POW/MIA bracelets – in direct relation to an overwhelming, complex and conflicted political situation. It discusses how the political situation may impact on the grieving process, in this case interfering with attempts to make peace with long-held and painful memories, or the forming of continuing bonds with dead loved ones. This research will seek to show why the essential neutrality of the Wall, as well as its contrasting functions of resistance and compliance, have become so important to U.S. culture in the face of political manipulation and even lies.

When people participate in rituals and deposit objects at the Wall, they do so both in opposition to, and in concert with a concept of the national unity (Sturken, 1997). The traditional 'Wall' icons – its metaphors, objects, bonding rituals and narratives – provide a structure for a collective consciousness or national subjectivity; but, as we see, is also subject to manipulation. Lauren Berlant (1991) suggests that this may affect the user's subjective experience of their political views and, perhaps, their political right to those views as well. The political conflict, and possibly repression, as suggested by Berlant, will be emphasised in this chapter through the stories of two women.

Gloria Coppin is my central research character. She represents women, as well as a sector of society, who were viciously damaged by their well meant contribution to the

war. Carol Bates, on the other hand, who initially worked under Coppin's influence, has a very different and sometimes conflicted story. I will use Bates' wider narrative both as a foil for Coppin's experiences, but also as a descriptor of the role that national power had in the Vietnam War, its aftermath, the Wall, the objects left there, and ordinary people's loss and grief.

The Narratives

Carol Bates¹⁵⁰

'The first bracelets were made by a Carol Bates, who now works for the Defence POW-Missing Persons Office. The bracelets come in various finishes and on each bracelet is engraved, at a minimum, the name, rank, service, loss date, and country of loss of a missing man from the Vietnam War. Here is Carol's article on the origin of the bracelets.

By Carol Bates Brown¹⁵¹

In recent months, several individuals have contacted me looking for information on the origin of the POW/MIA bracelets worn during the early 1970s. The following is offered for those interested in learning the history of the bracelet phenomena.

I was the National Chairman of the POW/MIA Bracelet Campaign for VIVA (Voices in Vital America), the Los Angeles based student organization that produced and distributed the bracelets during the Vietnam War. Entertainers Bob Hope and Martha Raye served with me as honorary co-chairmen.

¹⁵⁰ Article found on the Vietnam Memorial Website, <http://thewall-usa.com/index.asp> Sighted 18th December 2010.

¹⁵¹ Carol Bates became known as Carol Bates Brown, subsequent to the events described in this research, thus I will retain her original name, except for the explicit instances where she has chosen to use her full title.

The idea for the bracelets was started by a fellow college student, Kay Hunter, and me, as a way to remember American prisoners of war suffering in captivity in Southeast Asia. In late 1969, television personality Bob Dornan (who several years later was elected to the US Congress) introduced us and several other members of VIVA to three wives of missing pilots. They thought our student group could assist them in drawing public attention to the prisoners and missing in Vietnam. The idea of circulating petitions and letters to Hanoi demanding humane treatment for the POWs was appealing, as we were looking for ways college students could become involved in positive programs to support U.S. soldiers without becoming embroiled in the controversy of the war itself. The relatives of the men were beginning to organize locally, but the National League of POW/MIA Families had yet to be formed.

During that time, Bob Dornan wore a bracelet he had obtained in Vietnam from hill tribesmen, which, he said, always reminded him of the suffering the war had brought to so many. We wanted to get similar bracelets to wear to remember U.S. POWs so rather naively, we tried to figure out a way to go to Vietnam. Since no one wanted to fund two sorority-girl types on a tour to Vietnam during the height of the war, and our parents were livid at the idea, we gave up and Kay Hunter began to check out ways to make bracelets. Soon other activities drew her attention and she dropped out of VIVA, leaving me, another student Steve Frank, and our adult advisor, Gloria Coppin, to pursue the POW/MIA awareness program. The major problem was that VIVA had no money to make bracelets, although our advisor was able to find a small shop in Santa Monica that did engraving on silver, used to decorate horses. The owner agreed to make 10 sample bracelets. I can remember us sitting around in Gloria Coppin's kitchen with the engraver on the telephone, as we tried to figure out what we would put on the bracelets.

This is why they carried only name, rank and date of loss, since we didn't have time to think of anything else.

Armed with the sample bracelets, we set out to find someone who would donate money to make bracelets for distribution to college students. It had not yet occurred to us that adults would want to wear the things, as they weren't very attractive. Several approaches to Ross Perot were rebuffed, including a proposal that he loan us \$10,000 at 10% interest. We even visited Howard Hughes' senior aides in Las Vegas. They were sympathetic, but not willing to help fund our project. Finally, in the late summer of 1970, Gloria Coppin's husband donated enough brass and copper to make 1,200 bracelets. The Santa Monica engraver agreed to make them and we could pay him from any proceeds we might realize.

Although the initial bracelets were going to cost about 75 cents to make, we were unsure about how much we should ask people to donate to receive a bracelet. In 1970, a student admission to the local movie theatre was \$2.50. We decided that this seemed like a fair price to ask from a student for one of the nickel-plated bracelets. We also made copper ones for adults who believed they helped their "tennis elbow". Again, according to our logic, adults could pay more, so we would request \$3.00 for the copper bracelets.

At the suggestion of local POW/MIA relatives, we attended the National League of Families annual meeting in Washington DC, in late September. We were amazed at the interest of the wives and parents in having their man's name put on bracelets and in obtaining them for distribution. Bob Dornan, who was always a champion of the POW/MIAs and their families, continued to publicize the issue on his Los Angeles television talk show and promoted the bracelets.

On Veterans Day, November 11, 1970, we officially kicked off the bracelet program with a news conference at the Universal Sheraton Hotel. Public interest quickly grew and we eventually got to the point we were receiving over 12,000 requests a day. This also brought money in to pay for brochures, bumper stickers, buttons, advertising and

whatever else we could do to publicize the POW/MIA issue. We formed a close alliance with the relatives of missing men - they got bracelets from us on consignment and could keep some of the money they raised to fund their local organizations. We also tried to furnish these groups with all the stickers and other literature they could give away.

While Steve Frank and I ended up dropping out of college to work for VIVA full time to administer the bracelet and other POW/MIA programs, none of us got rich off the bracelets. VIVA's adult advisory group, headed by Gloria Coppin, was adamant that we would not have a highly paid professional staff. As I recall, the highest salary was \$15,000 a year and we were able to keep administrative costs at less than 20 percent of income.

In all, VIVA distributed nearly five million bracelets and raised enough money to produce untold millions of bumper stickers, buttons, brochures, matchbooks, newspaper ads, etc. to draw attention to the missing men. In 1976, VIVA closed its doors. By then, the American public was tired of hearing about Vietnam and showed no interest in the POW/MIA issue.'

Gloria Coppin¹⁵²

'The Government wanted to control the POW/MIA Movement'

'A daughter of privilege, her father founded the hydro-Mill Corporation, an aerospace manufacturer in California. At a dinner party in 1966, she met some UCLA students who said that they were having problems with anti-war demonstrators – that campus unrest was a distraction from their education. I said I would help. They founded the Victory in Vietnam Association (VIVA), an organisation that she chaired until 1974. "We first made national news at Los Angeles City College when VIVA students returned furniture that

¹⁵² Appy (2008: 489-492)

antiwar demonstrators had used to create barricades, reopened the school, and ended the violence that had hospitalised many.”

In 1968, Bob Dornan, host of a television talk show, who later became a congressman, introduced her to three women whose husbands were missing in Vietnam. “I recognised how torturous it was for them not to know if their husbands were even alive. I pledged to them that I would devote the entire efforts of VIVA to alert every American to the plight of POW/MIAs and their families”, with this new focus, VIVA changed its name to Voices in Vital America’.

‘People sometimes ask why I was so active in VIVA when I had no family members in Vietnam. I think it’s because I can’t conceive how anyone has the courage to face war and guns. I would do whatever I could to support them. I’m a product of World War II, when everyone worked for the effort. I was frustrated that I wasn’t old enough to drive a Red Cross truck. I could only raise a Victory garden. The war movies left such a deep impression, particularly one called “The Purple Heart”. Dana Andrews led a bomber crew that had a phoney trial in Japan. They were convicted to die and went to their deaths whistling the Army Air Corps song. I just cried buckets.

In 1967, I gave the first annual “Salute to the Armed Forces” dinner, with the purpose of entertaining a hundred enlisted men, most of whom had recently come back from Vietnam. We underwrote the dinner by charging corporate sponsors to attend a VIP cocktail party with the governor, senators, congressmen and top Pentagon staff. A friend steered me to Leroy Prinz, the choreographer of fantastical musicals in the early forties. He did a grand entrance of the Admirals and Generals with lights low and trumpets blaring. It was just awe inspiring. It was heart rendering to see enlisted men with tears running down their cheeks saying, “We didn’t realise anyone cared”.

In 1969, Bob Dornan dropped by and showed me an elephant haired bracelet he had received from a Montagnard chief during a trip to Vietnam. He said that it reminded him that no matter how tired he got, the Montagnards were suffering more than he was. I started to think how wonderful it would be if everyone had a bracelet to remind them of the suffering of the POWs. So I found a very caring man with a small metal working shop in Santa Monica who made the first bracelets on consignment. They were polished nickel-plated bands engraved with the name of a POW or MIA and the date he was lost. We put them in plastic bags with a card asking that it should be worn until the man on the bracelet either returned home from prison or had been accounted for.

We introduced the bracelet at the 1970 salute to the armed forces dinner and it soon got to be a major thing. People took them seriously. The bracelets were worn by the top movie stars and some had to have their costumes redesigned because they refused to take them off. We had letters from parents asking if we could give special permission to their children, so that they could remove their bracelets for surgery.

They cost us fifty cents and we charged two and a half dollars. The demand grew to a point that we opened sixty-eight offices across the country, staffed with thousands of volunteers along with about one hundred staff on the payroll. By 1973, VIVA was bringing in more than seven million dollars a year. We put all the profits back into the MIA/POW cause. We brought brochures, buttons, bumper stickers, billboards and match covers, which we gave to the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia to distribute. There wasn't a day that there weren't three or four POW/MIA events going on somewhere in the nation.

During my last five and a half years with VIVA, I never had more than two hours sleep a night. In 1974, I was hospitalised for five days and diagnosed as a manic-depressive and told I needed complete rest. That's when I resigned from VIVA. When I left, we had

more than five million dollars in the bank. Six months later, VIVA's doors were closed and I still don't know what happened to the money.

I felt that I had failed everyone – the MIA Families, the many who had contributed to our efforts, but most of all, my own family. I had neglected my husband and children. My husband had sat alone drinking saying, "I can't live with you and I can't live without you". The guilt increased as I eventually lost both my sons, one to drinking and drugs, the other to suicide. I can't help but ask myself how great a part my lack of attention played in their deaths. I had always told my husband "I can't abandon twelve hundred families that need help", but soon I wondered how I could have abandoned the most precious family of all. My daughter turned out fine, but she only recently forgave me.

The Government wanted to control the POW/MIA movement. I was called to the Whitehouse one time and was told by two men, "You do what we tell you to do". I said, "this is a non-political issue and, besides, I'm a registered Republican. Why should you worry about me?". I said, "Nobody is going to control me", and I left. A few days later, we were kicked out of our office in Washington that had been donated by the Red Cross. After the peace treaty, the Defence Departments director of public information was sent to California to demean me on talk shows. He said that I was in it for the money, although he knew I never took a dime from VIVA or anyone else. There was a concerted effort from the White House to attack any of us who were bringing to light that Nixon's promises had not been kept and the issue had not been resolved.

I finally wondered if Nixon had used this cause to prolong the war. The anti-war movement was gaining momentum when the prisoner-of-war issue came along. As soon as it became a major issue, Nixon was constantly on the tube saying he wanted to end the war but had to get a full set of accounting for all prisoners first. Yet, the truth is that he and Kissinger signed a peace treaty that left fifty-five men who had been known to be

*prisoners totally unaccounted for. Someone had to know what happened to them, but their families never will. Nixon left hundreds of family members in torture to this day.*¹⁵³

The fact that my efforts may have contributed to more deaths than the number that it may have helped will always haunt me. The only thing that makes me feel a little better about the whole situation is that by drawing the attention of the world to the issue, I think it led Hanoi to treat the prisoners better. The greatest reward I could have ever dreamed of was when Captain Harry Jenkins, a prisoner for many years, said, "I wouldn't be here if it weren't for you". Nevertheless, our efforts to gain closure for these many families failed, and when you go to Washington you may still see some people selling POW/MIA bracelets. It makes your heart break.' (Appy, 2008: 489-492)

The sense of needing 'closure' is deeply symbolic of the attitudes of everyday Americans. The popular belief is that without it, it is impossible to deal (healthily) with the future. The notion that people with grief are, in fact, sick, and to be well need to 'close' in order to complete their grief finds some support in Coppin's text. At the same time, the author is presenting very real evidence of her own continuing bonds with the past, her political activities, the loss of her sons, her husband's suffering and what happened to her country because of the nature and politics of the conflict and in relation to the men who are still missing. This sense of loss and re-bonding will become central to the further exploration of Coppin and her bracelets.

It is interesting that Coppin is still experiencing a form of transition herself, that this part of her life is not complete or finished. As Klass *et al* (1996) suggests, continuing bonds theory is not static or prescriptive, people develop and change; their personal stories grow and they mature whilst still maintaining a bond with the past and what has been lost. Coppin comes from a wealthy, right wing, Republican, war supporting family. Her feelings and perceptions develop over time through her experiences of the war. Loss

¹⁵³ Cawthorne (2008), in his modern study also confirms the likelihood of some U.S. soldiers being left behind after the Vietnam War.

and suffering are mediated through the copper bracelets to a more centrally sceptic position about the causes, conduct and consequences of the war upon soldiers, their families and America. Her own narrative in this transition is informative because it reveals both the personal consequences for Coppin, but also how powerful national interests complicated the mourning processes for thousands of Americans who were directly or indirectly involved with the war.

Political Context

Gloria Coppin (the wife of Los Angeles industrialist Douglas Coppin) whose Hydro-Mill Corporation manufactured airplane parts for major military contractors, was providing the VIVA organisation with headquarters and contacts with wealthy and influential members of southern California society. On 9th March 1967, the Victory in Vietnam Association (VIVA) received a state charter from California as an educational institution, and less than two months later, the IRS granted it tax exemption status as a charitable and educational institution. VIVA was now able to fund the first of its lucrative annual salutes to the Armed Forces through dinner dances, organised by its Auxiliary (wives of wealthy industrialists and politicians), which allowed the guests – including Barry Goldwater, Alexander Haig, H. Ross Perot, Bob Hope and Ronald Reagan – to receive tax deductions for their contributions (Koenigsamen, 1987 cited in Franklin, 1992).¹⁵⁴ The political bias towards VIVA is apparent here in a way not established by Coppin in Appy's work. Koenigsamen paints a far more complex and in some ways, damning picture.

Robert Dornan, a Republican representative and a close friend of Gloria Coppin, conceived the idea of selling bracelets engraved with the names of POWs and MIAs to promote the campaign of highlighting the missing servicemen. Coppin, who was chair of VIVA's board of directors, was assisted by Carol Bates, who was to take over the

¹⁵⁴ Koenigsamen, J., 1987. *Mobilization of a Conscience Constituency: VIVA and the POW/MIA Movement*. Unpublished Dissertation. Kent State University: 36-38 cited in Franklin (1992)

directorship of the National League of Families in 1976, and in 1984 became the Principle coordinator of the POW/MIA section of the Defence Intelligence Agency. This situation somewhat questions the closing statement of her article on the Wall website, suggesting that in 1976 the American public lost interest in the issue of missing servicemen (Franklin, 1992: 56).

The first bracelets were produced in May 1970 for the 'Salute to the Forces' Ball. Governor Ronald Reagan was the guest speaker. H. Ross Perot was elected as 'Man of the Year' and his wife received the first bracelet. At the Ball, Perot refused to help finance the bracelets and even refused a loan to initiate their production (Franklin, 1992: 219; Bates article). This is all the more surprising given the later role that Perot was to play in the controversy surrounding the design of the Wall and the compromise statues, as well as the major role that former Vietnam War POWs were to play in his presidential election attempt. Nonetheless, VIVA did go on to produce the bracelets and then went on to sell twelve hundred items in the first month alone, and take orders for five thousand more.

Bracelets were to become the biggest single propaganda tool, and a source of revenue for the POW/MIA groups as well as for VIVA. The bracelets brought in \$2 each as direct profit to VIVA. By 1972, VIVA was distributing more than five thousand bracelets a day and during peak demand in the summer months, frequently as many as eleven thousand were produced. VIVA's income soared to \$3,698,575 in 1972 and, despite the Peace Accords of that year; it rose to \$7,388,088 in 1973. Bracelets were worn by Richard Nixon, General Westmoreland (the U.S. forces Commander in Vietnam), Billy Graham, Charlton Heston, Bill Crosby, Pat Boone, Cher and Sonny Bono, Fred Astaire, Jonny Cash, Steve Allen, Princess Grace of Monaco and Bob Hope. The bracelets were also used extensively by sports stars, who frequently held the conviction that their copper content helped their game (Koenigsamen, cited in Franklin 1992).

By the time of the 1973 Paris Peace Accord, it is estimated that up to ten million Americans were wearing POW/MIA bracelets (Koenigsamen, cited in Franklin 1992). The influence of the bracelets on national perception cannot be overestimated. Each wearer committed to not removing the bracelet until the POW/MIA serviceman whose name was engraved on that individual bracelet had returned to the U.S.A. Therefore, millions of Americans could be considered to have developed both a personal and collective deep, emotional bond with the men (often dead) whose names were carried everywhere with the wearers. Thousands of American school children were linked to these bracelets in their most formative years and were perhaps 'imprinted' with the notion of the lost and unrecovered from the Vietnam conflict.

This sense of loss, complicated by the political and social perspective that America endured in the Vietnam conflict years, may go some way to explain the profound sense of loss experienced at the Wall by those who did not fight or lose someone in the conflict. The MARS repository has literally thousands of these bracelets in its collection. They used to separate them out but, due to the numbers involved, they now are stored in chronological order with the other items.¹⁵⁵ Moreover, despite Carol Bates' assertion, the significance of the bracelets does not seem to have diminished. On my last research visit to the Wall in February 2010, Washington DC was covered in snow and ice, at times minus 20 °C, yet there was a small portable stall close to the Wall selling MIA bracelets.

The original POW/MIA issue (supported by the selling of the bracelets) served two significant functions. It may have contributed to allowing Richard Nixon to continue the War for an additional four years, even though he was elected with a very clear public mandate for peace. Furthermore, it served as a platform to counter both the peace movements in America and the Paris talks. This resonates with Coppin's comments on her activities with VIVA in an interview in 1990, *'Nixon and Kissinger just used the POW issue to prolong the war. Sometimes I feel guilty because, with all our efforts, we killed*

¹⁵⁵ Seen by author during personal visit to the MARS repository, February 2010.

more men than we saved' (Gettleman *et al*, 1995: 472-473). As seen in earlier chapters, this strong sense of personal conflict about actions taken with regard to the Vietnam War is a constant presence for both the people involved and the objects left at the Wall.

In 1974, during Coppin's absence, VIVA made a \$20,000 contribution to the National League of Families, which essentially bought the League out. Franklin suggests that this act could only be interpreted as VIVA buying into the League's leadership hierarchy. The most noticeable transplant was Carol Bates who began working as an assistant to the League's Executive Director, and was ultimately to attain the post (Appy, 2008; Franklin, 1992). From this point, and during Coppin's illness, VIVA started to wind down and fold itself into the League. Jointly, they attempted to persuade a majority of Congress to subscribe to their pledge:

'I agree that any economic assistance, trade or technological aid to North Vietnam, Cambodia, South Vietnam and Laos should be withheld until we get the return of all POWs and the fullest possible accounting of the missing in action and the return of the remains of those who died in the Vietnam conflict... I agree that the resolution of this tragic issue should be one of the nation's top priorities' (Koenigsamen, 1987: 70 cited in Franklin 1992).

The joint approach received very strong support from Congressman G. Montgomery, who, in 1975, became the chair of the Select committee on Missing Persons in Southeast Asia, to which was granted a wide ranging mandate. VIVA and the League worked closely with the select committee, which gave a special vote of thanks to Carol Bates just as she was becoming the Executive Director of the National League of Families in 1976 (Franklin, 1992: 87). This again stands in some contrast to what Bates implies in her statement on the Vietnam Memorial website. There is a real divergence here in the way the two women are dealing with the issues on the MIA/POWs. The young and

ambitious Bates becomes very involved in the political dimensions of the issue and progressing her own position, often against very real opposition, and is not afraid to move in a new direction. Whereas, for Coppin (like the families of the missing servicemen and the wider American public), the personal cost in terms of loss, family unity, her own mental health and personal integrity in the face of strong political pressure were to have a devastating effect.

Both of these women were committed to the recovery of American servicemen, but from very different perspectives. Coppin mirrored the disintegration of self-belief that the United States was subject to, whilst Bates had chosen a clear eyed and Republican approach to the issues. Together, they were symptomatic of the near civil war that was experienced during this period in America (Kwon, 2008: 13), and arguably continues to this day. These experiences, based upon the national trauma of the war rather than death and loss within the conflict itself, clearly found expression in the use of the bracelets and continue to find expression in their being deposited at the Wall today.

This conflict in American society was further intensified by what many considered to be major betrayal. Montgomery released his report to the House Select Committee, which concluded that:

'No Americans are still being held alive as prisoners in Indochina, or elsewhere, as a result of the war in Indochina and that a total accounting by the Indochinese Governments is not possible and should not be expected....There are no examples in world history to compare with the accounting now being requested'.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁶ Americans Missing in Southeast Asia: Final report of the House Select Committee on Missing Persons in Southeast Asia, 94th Congress, 2nd session, December 13th, 1976. Washington DC.: Government Printing Office, vii, 209.

Needless to say the League of Families was far from impressed.¹⁵⁷

In August of that year, Vietnam requested U.N. membership. The POW/MIA groupings sought to link the 712 men still missing to Vietnam's application, which the U.S. Government, now under Carter, declined. Carol Bates condemned the administration as 'deceitful and disgraceful' and stated that the '*decision to administratively "kill off" the remaining POWs and MIAs by declaring them all legally dead is the final blow in what has become a long list of broken promises*' (Clarke, 2002: 109). Thus, Bates both reflected and contributed to the national sense of betrayal over the conflict, long after the cessation of hostilities.

Later, President Reagan took an entirely different view and set up an Interagency Report on the POW/MIA issue. He vastly expanded the POW/MIA section of the Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA), more than tripling its staff and adding Carol Bates to the DIA staff (Franklin, 1992: 140). President Reagan, who firmly believed in the existence of MIAs remaining in Vietnam said, '*Government bureaucracy would have to understand that the POW/MIA issue had assumed the highest national priority*'.¹⁵⁸

Reagan's politically conflicted approach to the post-Vietnam POW/MIA issue served to further confuse American society and attitudes towards the war. U.S. television and motion pictures displayed very confused and contradictory images and narratives, which did not help in either resolving the pain and loss of those who served, or those who were left behind. This politically inspired confusion found a ready reflection in the country's popular culture.

'The Vietnam War is not really over... and we – America – can still pass for a touchdown at Ho Chi Minh Stadium and eke out a last second victory in

¹⁵⁷ For a contextualised view of these events see Schulzinger (2006: 6 -30).

¹⁵⁸ Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan, Washington DC.: Government Printing Office, 1984 131.

*the Rice Paddy Bowl. Just send a few good boys back there, kick some Asian ass, liberate a few MIAs. The Laotians or Cambodians or Vietnamese, for they are all really alike – will fall like Indians in a John Wayne movie and America will be proud and regain its honour.’ (Rob Edelman, reviewing *Uncommon Valour*).¹⁵⁹*

In 1992, Ross Perot launched his own campaign as the (alleged) wartime champion of the POWs and, in scenes reminiscent of ‘Rambo II’, the rescuer of those left behind in Vietnam and the U.S. nation itself. The POW issue became the metaphor for Perot’s campaign (Schulzinger, 2006: 49-50; Franklin 1993: 188). As one commentator put it, *‘the country is the prisoner, held hostage by lobbyists and professional politicians, and he and the American people together will create a commando team to rescue it’* (John Taylor, New York Times, 15th June 1992).

Perot had no party machinery for his election as he stood as an independent. His remarkably effective substitute was a network of activists motivated by near religious fervour and coordinated by grassroots organisations, namely the POW/MIA movement. Perot chose former Vietnam POW James Stockdale as his running mate and former Vietnam POW, Orson Swindle, as his campaign manager. ‘Homecoming II’, an organisation which promoted military intervention to recover MIAs directly challenged the Federal government by turning the Wall into a perpetual campaign prop for Perot in direct contravention on National Park Service and the Vietnam Memorial Committee’s regulations (New York Daily News, 11th June 1992)

‘The POWs are all over the place. It’s incredible. He has POW flags all over the stage. He has former POWs and their families up on the stage with him and he introduces them, and he always works into his speech how it’s horrible to leave the guys behind’ (Franklin, 1992: 188).

¹⁵⁹ Edelman, R. *Uncommon Valour*, *Cineaste* 13 (No 3, 1984: 47)

These are the actions of the man who refused to support Coppin's bracelet campaign. POW activists and supportive organisations were very active and successful in the campaign to get Perot on to the ballot in every state. Delores Apodaca Alford, who was national chairperson of the National Alliance of Families for the Return of Missing Servicemen, asserted that most of the volunteers working for Perot were POW/MIA activists, family members, or known supporters, and their effect on the election was telling (Franklin, 1992: 189). Many still feel that Bush lost the election to Clinton because of the Perot candidacy. What Coppin and Bates started with a cheap bracelet on a kitchen table had come a very long way and still has enormous personal and national repercussions.

Franklin suggests that there are those who remain determined to keep the Vietnam War current through the medium of the POW/MIA myth. The 'evidence' needed to support this proposition has become so thin that it now lacks even a veneer of plausibility. As late as 1993, a poll revealed that 60% of the American public still believed that U.S. POWs are still being held in Southeast Asia (Wall Street Journal, 23rd April, 1993). It might be possible to argue that this is the 'Rambo effect', as Franklin does several times in his book, but I would suggest that this is too simplistic. Instead, this study suggests that what is really happening in America is a public adoption of a political narrative with regard to the Vietnam conflict, which works alongside the 'loss' and 'bereavement' narratives and stories at the Wall. This suggestion finds support from the evidence within both Coppin's and Bates' very different narratives.

The two women do have similar and compatible aims, but very different personal stories and outcomes. Their differing experiences, based upon some shared events, are almost completely opposite; likewise, at times, their recall of events. Bates is feisty, aggressive and combatant; she is not afraid of the political arena and one gets the impression that she enjoys it. Coppin is hurt, vulnerable and evidently (as expressed in her interview

with Appy), still extremely angry at what she sees as multiple lies and betrayals of her personally, her family and the MIA/POW servicemen she cares deeply about. How then do these very dissimilar narratives work in relation to the Wall and the bracelets within this conflicted political meta-story?

The Politics of Storytelling

Sociologically, the public realm is a space of shared interest, where a plurality of people work together to create a world to which they feel they all belong (Arendt, 1958: 50-58). Arendt's approach is focused upon an ontological assumption that individual humanity always has extension in space and time – hence the use of universal metaphors of human existence as a net, web or a root system. However, rootedness is a human characteristic, before anything else, inextricably linked to a person's real and active participation in the life of the community.

In terms of individual identity and story, one's being is cathected¹⁶⁰ and re-cathected onto many others and many objects in the course of one's struggle to achieve a sense of security and viability (Gunaratnam & Oliviere, 2009). Thus, totemic, inanimate objects – including prized personal possessions, dwellings and landscapes – as well as abstract concepts and ideals may become, by extension, aspects of oneself that one could not conceive being without. This is significant both from the sense of community and that of individuals. The re-interpretation of object and self, through and with the Wall and the Bracelets in the lives of the American Nation, Coppin and Bates is evidenced by this process (Jackson, 2006).

Thus, Arendt suggests that storytelling can transform private into public meanings (the reverse is also valid). Further, Jackson's concept helps to interpret storytelling as a vital

¹⁶⁰ Emotionally focused upon a person or object.

human strategy for sustaining a sense of agency in the face of disempowering circumstances.¹⁶¹ Both of these approaches are valid in interpreting the actions at the Wall. Jackson suggests that to reconstruct events in a story is to remove those events from passivity and to then actively rework them, both in dialogue with others and within one's own imagination. Thus one's inner monologue becomes re-aligned to social discourse. Whilst storytelling makes sociality possible, it is also vital to the illusory and self-justifying activity of individual minds. This approach is evidenced in the widows' letters, the veterans' objects and their treatment, Luttrell's journey and – I would argue – most significantly in both Coppin's and Bates' conflicted tales (Jackson, 2006: 15).

Though many authors have argued that stories promote order and coherence of events and related places, it is important to consider the reconstruction of reality that relates to our own need to be more than insignificant players in our life stories. In our lives, we take centre stage. This is not to imply that storytelling allows us to intellectualise events; it does not grant us cognitive understandings of our world, but rather allows us to define, and change our experience of them: we choose. This is important because it permits us, in terms of grief, to release some of the trauma and events that we need to liberate, but it conversely promotes a continuing bonding action by allowing a reinventing (or reliving) of the past and our connection and role within it. This approach finds evidence in the letters left by the widows, in Laurent's 'Vietnam box' and in the traumatised stories of Coppin and Bates. This is not lying; it is a positive use of a teleogenic process (Paley, 2009: 17 - 32) that allows reinterpretation and re-evaluation based upon the need to find meaning in our experience.

'American Chopper' is a TV series where custom made motorbikes are manufactured by a small business, run by a father and his two sons in New York State. The father had served in the Merchant Navy during the Vietnam Years and had been haunted by not having served in the military, and very affected by the POW/MIA movements. In one

¹⁶¹ There is an obvious link here with Teleogenic plots, with particular note to my chapter on the widows' letters.

program,¹⁶² following a visit to the Wall with two veterans, he and his sons built a chopper bike dedicated to those who did not return from the conflict. The bike was extremely detailed. The rear fender had a segment of the Wall 'names' embossed on it and the rear break light was incorporated into the MIA/POW Logo. There were many specific items incorporated into the bike including the Ace of spades logo and the 101st Airborne motif for the two Veterans.¹⁶³ Most significantly the father chose to incorporate not one but two MIA bracelets into the central steering column as the bike's central statement, which tied the various narratives of loss, incorporated into the bike, together. At the unveiling, the two Veterans said, *'It don't matter if you served or not, the whole country went through it then, we all lost'*. The Father said that making the bike was the most significant act of his life. The bike was not left at the Wall as previous themed bikes had been, the father wanted to keep it, although not to be used. The bike had become a symbol for who he was now and significantly who he might have been.

Developing this theme, Jackson (2006) suggests that stories, like music and dance, are a kind of theatre where we collaborate in our own reinvention and, where needed, healing.¹⁶⁴ The stories (or plays) can become authorisations, individually and corporately, of whom we are, almost a communal portrait.¹⁶⁵ I argue that this is exactly what takes place at the Wall. The depositing of items is part of a communal and personal narrative constructed individually and (as we have seen from the veterans treatment venues), collectively to both reinterpret the past but also to select a different approach towards understanding that past. The Wall is neutral; it allows everyone to use it, and that aspect is corporate, but it resists (not always successfully) the political

¹⁶² Aired in the U.K. at 8pm, 19th December 2010 on 'Quest'.

¹⁶³ The 'Ace of Spades' was a good luck motive for many units serving in Vietnam and the 101st Airborne elite troopers used the 'screaming Eagle' symbol. Both are examples of visual objects which carry their own metanarratives.

¹⁶⁴ Tony Walter (2001: 79-81) in discussing the culture of grief in 'biographical reconstruction' describes storytelling models used in counselling. He establishes a sound argument for the need for objective truth in this process. Whilst broadly agreeing with this, particularly with regard to group identity, the need to rediscover a sense of self, nationally and personally at the Wall, given the complexity of loss endured during and post-Vietnam, has to be seen as a subjective action.

¹⁶⁵ Teter's painting (Figure 6) provides a good example

pressure to conform to one dominant view. Therefore, it also allows a personal transformation, rediscovery and reinterpretation of self, which is tremendously helpful in resolving some long term grief. In effect, it permits continued bonding to events and people, but from a new and different perspective.

Stories¹⁶⁶ are, therefore, not just imitation of events as they actually transpired. In their personally adapted forms, stories construct what actually took place as an engagement decided by the individuals themselves. They do not exactly mirror reality; they can be counterfactual and, in that, they aid and abet our need to determine who we are and where we want to go. Each of the objects left at the Wall has a story attached to it. Some are very obvious, but all too frequently we will never know the stories. This is especially true of the thousands of MIA/POW bracelets left there. They carry the narratives of the names engraved upon them, the stories and histories of those who purchased and wore them, the families of the missing and the stories behind the giving up of the bracelet at the Wall, with all the political, social and cultural ramifications for that decision.¹⁶⁷ One of the key revelations to come out of this research is the need for, and difficulty in achieving, change; which seems to be important in the grief and loss encountered at the Wall. That is why the objects and the stories behind them are considered so intrinsically important that the U.S. Government stores every one of them at the MARS repository, and the Smithsonian has a permanent display of them.

In Coppin's case, her need to tell her story was not incorporated in the objects that she helped to make. She chose to share her biography with Appy in the full knowledge that it would be published. She knew she would not get 'justice' or 'vengeance' and certainly could not undo the massive family trauma and loss that she had incurred, but she needed to tell it anyway. Storytelling is usually prompted by a crisis, a stalemate or a significant loss, in relationship to the world or with others (Jackson, 2006: 18). In this event, the story may become a coping strategy that involves allowing words to become

¹⁶⁶ Separate from 'narratives' in this sense.

¹⁶⁷ Narrative and story as terms are deliberately used in separate senses, as defined by Abbot (2009).

intercessors (or bonds) with the world. They allow manipulation and change and might also permit a form of reconnection from one's 'assumed' inner world to the outer world and community. It is in the sharing of such stories that people find the ability to restore the viability of the damaged relationships and losses. This is why publishing her story is important to Coppin and the corporate act of depositing the object is so important to the Wall users.

Stories have the ability to cross, brake or blur the boundaries that mark crucial political and ethical spheres. They are liberating agents that potentially change our experience of the way things are by transporting us and helping us to (temporarily) transcend the confines our current lives, particularly when that existence becomes oppressive. They are, effectively, forms of life that promote, sustain and develop individual history and, to some degree, trauma. I would suggest that this is precisely the way that Coppin is using her narrative in Appy's book.

Stories are not just limited to an understanding of life as a journey; stories are also *like* journeys. They cross voids of nationhood and duty, of war and death, of violence and guilt and the living and the dead. If, therefore, as Jackson (2006) suggests, journeying is a function of story, the objects at the Wall are part of that journey (Unruh, 1983; Valentine, 2008)¹⁶⁸. In Coppin's case, a story is a journey that encounters grief, loss, betrayal, pain, objects and eventually an act of coming to terms with the past without an expression of release, from the core principles that both women believed in and, to some degree, still do.

Jackson also argues that this type of political and 'honour' based storytelling is based on 'place' and 'object' as much as the psyche of people or communities. Though he refers to the Australian aboriginal culture, I would argue that his observations also apply to the culture of the Wall. This culture includes the visitors who use the Wall and the objects

¹⁶⁸ Chapter 8 in particular

they leave there in order to maintain continuing bonds with their dead and the sites of loss related to the Vietnam conflict and that period in American history. Jackson goes further to suggest that when we have no settled place (within ourselves, as well as in terms of a physical site) from which to venture forth, then the stories we share, no matter how we represent them, become the route by which we recover who we are (Jackson, 2006: 33).

In a position strongly reminiscent of the work done by Parkes (1989), Jackson goes on to suggest that both natural disasters and social upheavals destroy the balance of power between what he describes as a person's 'immediate life world' and the 'wider world' (Jackson, 2006: 34). At these times, the questions about freedom and choice become acute, but the ability to tell our stories also becomes extremely difficult; a supposition that finds support from evidence found in all chapters within this thesis. Again, in this context, because of the conflict within individuals and U.S. society, and the politics surrounding what happened during the Vietnam conflict years, the use of objects as mediators and narrative holders in these 'loss' situations is evident (Murphy, 2007; Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Hatton, 1999).

This inability or lack of societal permission to tell our stories has been reported to have serious consequences. As early as 1950, William James identified the problems of enforced isolation within a community:

'No more fiendish punishment can be devised than that one should be turned loose in society and remain absolutely unnoticed by all the members thereof. If no one turned round when we entered, answered when we spoke, or minded what we did, but if every person that we met 'cut us dead,' and acted as if we were non-existing things, a kind of rage and impotent despair would ere long well up in us, from the curliest bodily tortures would be a relief; for this would make us feel that, however bad

might be our plight, we had not sunk to such a depth as to be unworthy of attention at all' (James, 1950: 293-294).

Scruggs (1992), in his book about the building of the Wall, suggests that we need to be able to feel our pain and our losses in a safe place. It becomes a part of who we are; our narrative, our story. Throughout the first five chapters, he repeatedly describes his inability to be accepted or to have anyone listen to who he is or what happened to him. It was whilst attending a Vietnam veteran's support meeting (held specifically to allow these stories to be told) that Scruggs formed the idea of the Wall (Scruggs & Swerdlow, 1992) to provide a place where Veterans and the nation could come to remember and honour their dead as well as a solid object that would be an accepting recipient of these stories. Coppin's story, as found in Appy's abstract, is also clearly identifying with a sense of repression and exclusion. Even 'Bates', in her contrasting narrative, frequently finds herself fighting for the space to communicate. The biggest single difference for these two women is that Coppin was reluctantly, and with great pain and shame, forced to 'drop' her bracelet (a part of her personal narrative), whilst Bates threw hers away.

This view of the consequences of hidden pain needing expression and recognition finds support from Bourdieu (1991). When either the State or society withholds recognition or acknowledgement, as in the case of the POW/MIAs issue, stories are not only carried internally, but may become totems held in silent, subjective shame. Jackson (never afraid to push a point) again goes further and suggests that, *'when storytelling loses its dialogical dimensions it becomes not only self-referential and solipsistic, but pathological'* (Jackson, 2006: 40). This reinforces the importance of the role of the Wall as a national totem, and arguably a 'lightning rod', for America during this period.

As we have seen in the 'Veterans' and 'Widows' couplets, many of the problems encountered post-conflict come from the inability to express pain, sorrow and loss. This effect, complicated by an American culture of needing quick answers to difficult

questions, and its compliance to an understanding of grief resolution that is marked by terms like, 'completion', 'moving on' and 'letting go' have complicated and compounded the already complex situation. The Wall works in that it permits anyone access. There is no judgement here, but when looking at the names carved into the polished granite there is the space for deeply held questions. The Wall provides a space where narratives do not often find conclusions, but where very deeply held and often suppressed narratives of grief and loss are allowed expression; rebonding and reconnecting are not only possible at this location but positively encouraged (Murphy, 2007).

The process at the Wall is a shared one, as we have seen. The national narrative remains a part of the personal story of the teller, but this personal voice is always interwoven into a polyphony of other voices. Without these stories and, more importantly, without listening to each other's stories, there can be no recovery of social and cultural norms. Stories at the Wall establish the basis for finding common ground and common cause. Without them, there can only be a residue of tragic events, disconnected from each other and politically divisive. The process of sharing at the Wall is based upon sharing and listening but, significantly, NOT about agreement. It is perfectly possible, and indeed expected, for completely dissenting voices to find equal respect and a home at the Wall. However, this process does not require agreement or compliance. Even a superficial glance at the contents of the MARS collection shows the widest possible range of opinions, including social, political and religious persuasions. Like Bates' and Coppin's bracelets, the stories attached are valid and different, but the objects are neutral.

Couplet Summary

This couplet of chapters explores the impact of the Wall on the way American culture has responded to death and loss in the years since its inception. The significance of the

role that the Wall plays, both for groups and individuals, may be found in its drawing attention to the way attitudes and assumptions about the Vietnam War have changed and evolved (as well as becoming more entrenched in some circumstances) in the decades after its construction. A key focus is the national narrative and conflicted cultural identity found at the Wall as objects, including the objects' associated narratives, political implications and potential for manipulation. This concept of dynamic function in the memorial finds expression in the use of the AIDS quilt, which found its genesis in the Wall, as well as in the range of objects placed at the Wall, in managing loss and grief. This is also the case – albeit in a politically opposite direction – in the POW/MIA conflicted narrative, which is symbolically represented in the bracelets, thousands of which have been left at the Wall.

The complexity of U.S. cultural items and representations is clear evidence that bereavement and loss narrative is produced not only at memorials, but also through commodities and in often confused visual imagery. Adorno (cited in Terdiman, 1993: 12-13) is supportive of this position, suggesting that specific and important objects could be 'hollowed out' and become containers of specific meaning and, as I have argued, they also become possible fulcrums in the expression of bereavement and loss by the visitors to the Wall. Significantly, Adorno also suggests that objects can be imbued with any meaning. It should not be surprising then, to find that emotional investment in inanimate objects, in a material culture, is not only common but also open to political consideration. This, I would argue is precisely what happened to Coppin's bracelets and the wider MIA/POW issue represented by flags, drawings, letters and personal visits to the Wall, still taking place on a daily basis.¹⁶⁹

The process and rituals at the Wall and in the associated National Mall provide a means for determining, questioning and reinterpreting the definition of what it might mean to be an American. It allows an interpretation, or perhaps even a creation of national and

¹⁶⁹ Evidenced in the weekly emptying of containers of objects left at the Wall, witnessed by the author, February 2010.

personal narrative to establish identity, the loss of which, in so many ways, is a significant consequence of the Vietnam War.

In this regard, Coppin provides a very singular experience of loss in relation to the war period and, to some degree, this exemplifies the many different expressions of loss and pain expressed at the Wall. It would have to be acknowledged that there are as many stories associated with the Vietnam War, the politics, myths and conflicted identities, as there are objects deposited at the Wall. Nonetheless, what Coppin's story contributes to this research is an example of popular American culture linked to a destructive relationship with the effects of the conflict, which finds expression, relief and an eventual acceptance of, and perhaps re-bonding to, its collective and singular past.



Figure 23: AIDS Quilt (AIDS Memorial Quilt Foundation)

Figure 24: Tricon Protest Flag. MARS Collection (Claudio Vazquez: Turner Publishing)



Figure 25: MIA-POW Bracelets. MARS Collection (Claudio Vazquez: Turner Publishing)

CHAPTER TEN

Summary

'Looking back on it is something we'll do for a very long time... It'll become an industry. There are so many of us who've been there' Just Ward, The American Blues

Introduction

This thesis began by exploring the relationship between bereavement, loss, the politics of the post-Vietnam experience and the objects deposited at, and in relation to, the Wall. This exploration deployed some of the key concepts used by bereavement theorists to the action of 'depositing', these being 'continuing bonds' (Klass *et al*, 1996), 'psychosocial transition' or PST (Parkes, 1998), story and narrative. Whilst compatible with the broader context of continuing bonding activity, PST provides a finer tool for discussing the traumatic sense of loss from the personal, cultural and political perspectives evidenced at the Wall, particularly with regard to the veterans. In order to capture the meanings given to the objects and their depositing and to the use of material culture more generally, story and narrative methods have been applied.

My examination has used a number of different theories in exploring the relationship between 'loss' and 'objects' in order to demonstrate a contextualised process of grief and loss in relation to specific objects rather than the more generalised understandings of authors such as Hass (1998) or Sturken (1997, 2007). No authors have explored either specific grief theories in relation to the Wall, or the significant fact that the Wall is dynamic and used differently by the various user groups.

With four million visitors a year, it is impossible to identify all of the users. However, by careful exploration of specific objects and their associated groups, it has been possible to identify how these objects relate to personal and group narratives and identities to provide a 'fulcrum' for the experience of loss and grief.

This study has argued that the most important of the emotions and experiences expressed at the Wall by users is one of grief. The trauma, pain, loss and transformation of America during this period and beyond are all significant events that find expression at the Wall via the objects deposited there; but this research has shown that these events have their roots in significant, but varied, loss and coping mechanisms, established in a re-bonding process.

Hass (1998) suggests that no other memorial has been built to have the same accessibility in design as the Wall; she argues that the Wall does not come to any consensus and is politically and socially neutral. It does, however, honour the soldiers; she argues that this is its strength and the reason why the Wall heals division so well. Hass develops her argument to suggest that this concept of personal and national healing is directly linked to both the Wall and the objects left there. She proposes that the absence of a clearly stated U.S. Government position on the conflict and on the design of the Wall prompted people to respond to the memorial with their own interpretations. This combined with the individual names marked with both corporate identity and singular individual narrative and the Wall's ability to reflect images, evolving funerary practices and shifting cultural values, contributed to the phenomenon of offering objects at the Wall. She further suggests that leaving something at the Wall is an act of negotiating each of the loss relationships between the dead and the nation, the dead and the past, and the dead and the living – in the face of a changing social and political climate.

Hass' in-depth arguments are contradictory; she contends that the actions at the Wall are to be interpreted as 'memorialisation', whilst simultaneously developing a concept that argues for a much deeper meaning to the events encountered there. Far from simply being a mark of respect and remembrance, this research suggests that what is happening at the Wall is a function of continuing bonds, which is strongly supported by a personal narrative often incorporating a teleogenic plot, which is a response to a widespread sense of loss and grief. It has provided evidence that far from being a straightforward and politically unaffected monument; the Wall has served as a focus for many conflicting and opposing views about the War, American society, politics and culture.

If this research is valid, then the narrative process described at the Wall must have both a national and a personal biographical aspect, which finds a basis within the argument deployed in the widows' actions described in an earlier chapter. Plummer (1983) suggests that biographical and autobiographical study be approached from an historical perspective, which includes single and multiple episodes and experiences that may not be chronological and can include individual and community based experiences. These may include folklore, ritual, popular culture and reflections, which are personal remembrances and expressions, rather than historical facts. This biographical approach can be directly linked to an understanding of teleogenic plot and finds expression and evidence in some of the significant personal narratives in this thesis, particularly those of Laurent and Coppel.

Whilst narrative study reports on the life of a single individual (even if we draw universalities from that life), phenomenological study is far better suited to exploring the meaning of, and at, the Wall for groups of individuals through their shared and lived experience of this phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). This research tool has therefore been used throughout this thesis and has been particularly relevant in terms of understanding the experiences of 'loss' amongst the Vietnam veterans and the shared national

experiences at the Wall. It has, however, been combined with narrative methods to explore both the shared, and the individual, reactions and understandings of loss, incurred during and after the war years. Combining the two approaches has been particularly relevant in understanding the role of 'object depositing' as a ritual.

The various groups who deposited differing objects have displayed very different belief structures. However, with each group, there appeared to be a powerful and corporate unity of understanding, which was also true of those who considered themselves individualistic and completely unaffiliated, but nevertheless did form their own disparate community. As this research has demonstrated, this action is particularly the case with the veterans, if less so the widows.

In order to address the significant group of communities established at the Wall in different ways, incorporating an entire cultural cluster, I found the use of an ethnographic approach both useful and justified. Typically focusing on larger groups, it permitted the research to explore and interpret shared and learnt patterns of behaviours, values, beliefs and language allowing for a pluralistic approach (Creswell, 2007), essential in the complex and fluid use of the Wall and its multi-faceted acceptance in American culture. The approach promotes questions about shared experiences, histories and understandings based in the past, but relevant to contemporary lives. As such, it provides an invaluable perspective for understanding the experiences (past and current) at the Wall of all the communities established there and beyond, in contemporary America; it has, therefore, been essential within this research.

Individually, none of these approaches address the way that the Wall functions as a national or 'totemic and shamanic' structure. I have used research deploying spatial theory to engage a range of theories on geographical thought, focusing both on specific traditions of thought within contemporary human geography (including government,

non-representational theories and historical narratives), and on the questions and problems addressed by power and control (Painter cited in Cok *et al*, 2007).

Including concepts of scale, territory, boundaries and a sustained engagement with the implications for spatial thought in the emergence of practice based ontology, this research has particular relevance for 'life space', through work on affect, emotion, vision, embodiment, materiality and memory. Not crisply designed or conceptualized, this approach to the study of structures and space with regard to materiality, objects and personal identity has particular significance with regard to the use of the Wall, the objects left there and the motivation for doing so. It does not provide an explanation for the actions at the Wall, as much as a practical tool for exploring them.

A key challenge of this research has been capturing the sheer complexity of the role played by the Wall in the experience of loss. The focus does not sit easily within any particular or single subject area. Rather, understanding this complexity has required a range of academic and disciplinary approaches, something which, at times, has made it difficult to remain fully focused on my main research area. This thesis then has become a compromise between the experience of loss and the context in which it is set, something which has been achieved through drawing on the role of people (singularly and in groups) and their stories, as my main methodological approach, functioned through the couplet structure of the work.

What is apparent in the actions found at the Wall is the central place of meaning-making through personal and group narrative underlying the essential nature of the gifting of objects. Hallam and Hockey (2001), as well as other authors, suggest that the use of objects in this way may, in some cases, be potentially damaging as it prevents 'closure' or the ability to 'move on'. They state:

'the materials enmeshed in the everyday lives of persons that survive after their deaths can evoke lost presence and present absence in potentially problematic ways. The tensions, ambiguities and contradictions integral to material environments that have undergone a form of 'trauma' or dislocation can be worked out through further interactions with material objects in social practice. So precarious and unstable is the balance between recovering and relinquishing the dead, between achieving a comforting sense of continuity whilst repeatedly encountering the rupture of an earlier, embodied contiguity, that the nature of materialities themselves and the way that survivors engage with them is crucial' (Hallam & Hockey: 103-104).

'Working out', in this context, is suggestive of an interpretation of the need to progress the bereavement or resolve the grief, although it may also indicate a way of living in a difficult circumstance. Both authors have a much broader remit and see grief in a wider aspect which allows narrative and 'reconnection', but in their limited exploration of the Wall, memorisation is key. I have suggested that in fact the letters and many of the other objects left at the Wall are evidence of the need for relationships to continue post-mortem, something which has been found to provide comfort to those who are grieving, as authors such as Walter (2001) and Valentine (2008) have shown. The life chapter may close, but the narrative develops and continues.

The depositing of objects at the Wall as a part of the individual's bereavement 'story' does not suggest that the objects are intrinsically harmful or painful to the owners. Indeed they may well represent the depositing of precious and treasured parts of the owners themselves and their own story. They remain 'linking objects' to the dead (Volkan, 1981), and their depositing may well indicate recognition of a distancing of pain and memory, but, as Allen's book (1995), which records some of the items deposited, clearly shows by the nature of some of the artefacts, the action of release is one of

respect (vitality), and reconnection rather than 'closure'. A positive 'linking' is made rather than broken, which then allows a measure of relocation of the survivors grief. As shown, this in turn finds support in the nature of the 'dead/living' relationship in Kwon's work (2008), the 'assumptive' research in Kauffman's (2002) and the actions of veterans as represented in Michalowski & Dubisch's book (2001).

A continuing bond does not mean that people live in the past (Goss & Klass, 2005) or fail to release, grow or develop. The very nature of mourners' daily lives is changed by the death or loss. The deceased are both present and absent. This concept should not be ignored, combined with the tension this creates in the bereavement process. The bond may shift and take new forms over time, whilst the connection remains. Mourners, especially children, may need help to keep their bonds alive or to let the deceased rest. In the case of American adults this is most notably true when the bodies of the dead are not returned or viewed. Connections to the dead need to be legitimized. People need to talk about the deceased, to participate in memorial rituals, and to understand that their mourning is an evolving, not a static, process. In the absence of the body, as Sturken (2007) suggests, a significant object might be essential in helping to form this bond.

The Wall provides a powerful, and particular, example of the power of the social bond which extends beyond death. This is achieved in spite of contemporary Western individualism with its focus on personal autonomy and self-responsibility. In terms of the United States, a very particular social and corporate understanding of the need to 'release', 'get over' and 'complete' the grief process is very evident, yet there is a lack of appropriate language for describing mourning as an integral and natural part of the life cycle. People do not always find 'closure', 'move on' or 'get over' it; 'continuing bonds', one contribution that I hope to have shown, reflects a new understanding of the process of what happens at the Wall in both a singular and national sense.

Not all authors agree. Nigel Field (2008) talks about an attachment perspective in relation to continuing bonds theory that is capable of distinguishing adaptive from maladaptive variants of continued bonds expression. Field suggests, using Bowlby's attachment theory (see Bowlby, 2005), that for 'healthy' mourning to have occurred, a person needs to accept that a change has occurred in the external world and that a corresponding change needs to have occurred in his internal representational world to acknowledge this (Bowlby 2005: 18). What is noteworthy here is the focus on reorganisation rather than detachment with obvious relevance to my argument on the depositing of objects at the Wall. Nonetheless, the aim for Field remains for a successful transitional and healing process. This stands at odds with the original concepts for continuing bonds theory.

Field's concept is developed to include the involvement of segregated systems that may account for how the bereaved oscillate between a brief, keen sense of the deceased's presence, and then later their acceptance of being permanently gone in a way that fails to acknowledge the reality of death (Field, 2008: 119-121). It is tempting to apply this understanding, and many others like it, to what happens at the Wall. Initially, there appears to be a clear coalition between theory and action which might seem to justify a prescriptive argument. I have chosen, however, not to do this.

As this thesis has shown, the use of the Wall is infinitely flexible, dynamic and changeable. It resists strict interpretations and prescriptive concepts about dis-attachment which do not reflect the evidence and the experiences encountered there. I have therefore resisted any strict or prescriptive directive based models which are looking for sharp and definite answers and objectives. Rather, this research has validated the use of continuing bonds (and to a lesser and looser degree Colin Parkes' psychosocial transitions model) as a flexible and positive tool in understanding some of the actions found at the Wall and the objects deposited there, in relation to loss and grief.

Widows

The diversity in which narrative, as a function of continuing bonds, found relevance in this research and representation in all of the major 'Wall user groups' begins with the exploration of widows' grief following the Vietnam War. The experience of the surviving families and widows has been little researched from the conflict. Yet their letters, written over the years since the war, are indicative in many cases of a unique experience of bereavement, related to the extraordinary circumstances of loss or, in many cases, multiple loss. I have shown how such losses are engaged with by the creation, and releasing, of letters at the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington DC, and how the use of an object, in this case a written narrative, can be seen as an expression of a 'continuing bond' that serves to renegotiate the relationship with both the widows' former husbands and a radically changing society. The use of narrative in terms of a 'teleogenic plot' in the story line produced a resolution that aims to elicit an emotional response from the reader. By deconstructing the narrative threads in some examples of these letters, I have sought to demonstrate how they become fulcrums in a complex and evolving grief conversation.

Central in this process is the choice of depositing. As I have demonstrated, for many Americans the Wall has become a place of healing and hallowed ground.¹⁷⁰ The memorial attracts four million visitors a year.¹⁷¹ As seen in previous chapters, these visitors have left over 150,000 objects which have now been catalogued and stored, very few of the objects are left by the widows of servicemen.¹⁷² The objects associated with this comparatively small, but significant group are almost exclusively letters, poems

¹⁷⁰ Scruggs & Swerdlow (1992). Hass (1998: 57). Murphy (2007: 23, 146). Lin (2000: 4, 14) from different perspectives, all attest to the sense of sacredness at the Wall.

¹⁷¹ Exchange of emails between US National Park Service and author 28th Oct 2009

¹⁷² Hass (1998), Allen (1995) and discussion with Duery Felton, Collection Curator, and the staff at the Memorial.

and notes. These letters have become part of a narrative which allows the widows to explore and renegotiate their continuing relationship with their dead husbands, rather than finding 'closure' or 'internalisation' of their grief (Klass *et al*, 1996). That relationship finds specific expression at the Wall. This thesis has presented significantly new research in this regard that has been built upon in all of its chapters.

My selection of the letters, based upon clearly identifiable research themes, including evidence of a continuing bond, uniquely revealed teleogenic plots. Whilst not all the letters from widows displayed these concepts, the vast majority did. Other common themes uncovered were the cultural and political consequences of loss experienced in the Vietnam era and its conflict, the need to derive meaning from the events and the unique expression of loss and continued relationship experienced through the narration. All of the selected letters are drawn from the Federal archive of objects left at the Wall. These same themes were to become the guiding structure for a substantial amount of the chapters that follow, as they reappeared again and again.

When exploring the contents of the widows' letters, I noted a number of similarities of construction and usage; they would suggest that the bereaved women have used written narrative to maintain links with their deceased husbands and that this leads to the construction of a new relationship with them, and with their society.¹⁷³ The letters reveal that their relationships have continued and changed over time, providing the women with comfort and solace and in some cases, I would argue, a route to recovery from profound grieving.

Rather than experiencing death as final and the task being one of internal adjustment to the 'reality of death', I have argued that these letters challenge the boundary between the living and the dead. They identify how the women's relationships survive death and how these continue to influence those they leave behind. The focus is placed on how

¹⁷³ A theme that Clive Seale (2003) explores throughout his book on the sociology of dying and bereavement.

bereaved people make sense of and manage the changed nature of their relationship, often by using significant objects to help with the expression of that change, in this case, letters. Bereavement by these women, in these circumstances, may thus be seen as a continuing narrative and ongoing process of negotiation and meaning-making (Howarth, 2007).

Unruh, a significant contributor to this research, suggested that this emotional attachment was reinforced by actions on the part of the survivors which helped to preserve the deceased person's identity, often for long periods after death has occurred (Unruh, 1983: 340). This concept of an active relationship is fundamental to this research. I suggest that the need, at specific times, to take an action (write and deposit that writing at a ritual site), can be essential not just in maintaining a bond, but in actively engaging with it, and in that, the dead person or the significant loss.¹⁷⁴ Authors such as Valentine (2008) have developed this argument, highlighting the narrative aspect of the bond. Acton, in her book on war grief, suggested that letters are a primary means by which individuals construct themselves through language in an endeavour to '*record events and emotions and attempt to control an unstable environment*' (Acton, 2007: 9). It is essential therefore to understand how the widows' letters are constructed to allow this 'control' to be established.

Recent research into the use of narrative in therapeutic situations suggests that the concept of a teleogenic plot is a valid approach for understanding the role of story in bereavement (Paley, 2009) Teleogenic plot reflects back upon itself and has many layers or spirals; it signals the conviction that the end writes the beginning and shapes the middle, thereby making it possible to see narrative proceeding in reverse. Stories are frequently constructed in retrospect and this is very important in understanding what is happening when widows and others leave letters at the Wall. I would contend that they are retelling their stories, or reaffirming and restructuring their personal relationships

¹⁷⁴ As this research has shown, the nature of loss expressed at the Wall is not always one of bereavement

with their former husbands, in light of their present social and personal circumstances and agendas.

This teleogenic perspective has another function: it may prime the reader for an outcome which is often unpredictable but may be necessary.¹⁷⁵ All stories create the expectation of resolution, often in unpredictable ways - some stories fulfil them (Gunaratnam & Oliviere, 2009: 25). The letters serve the purpose of retrospectively recognising a difficult and often neglected grieving process. Because they are structured at the point of writing, they can reach back in time and integrate the widow's experience to include their dead husband and, in this, reinforce or recover a continuing bond which has either been lost or denied. Hence, the use of a teleogenic plot is flexible enough to bring back a presence once felt irrevocably lost. Vellman (2003) suggests that, in relation to bereavement, this process of storytelling promises 'completion'. However, this thesis would strongly argue that the letters show that this is not necessarily the case and that, for the widows, it represents more of a chapter progression or an ability to move on in a new and accepted relationship with their former spouses.

Another useful aspect of a teleogenic approach is that cultural traditions offer a store of plot lines or narratives, which the post-Vietnam community both know and identify with, hence the concept of an accepted master plot (Abbot, 2009). This can best be seen in the various aspects, and the emotional investment of, the American people at the Wall. Many authors describe the Wall as an anti-monument (Savage, 2009) where the defining relationship of the public to grief and loss has found a new and unique expression (Murphy, 2007). But this expression, whilst fresh and distinctive to the Wall, is both generic and corporate. The use of objects and letters left there has been advanced over time and a new tradition with its own rules and uses has evolved. Thus, a type of 'master' or 'meta-story' has developed. For example, the Wall has its own

¹⁷⁵ Palmer (1988) gives a number of examples of these narratives from her book

celebration days, such as Mother's Day when only mothers and wives can go to the Wall, which is covered with single red roses; Father's Day is similarly celebrated with Fathers and children being the accepted community for that day. Apart from the more obvious Veteran's Day there is also a Christmas tree day among other celebrations (Murphy, 2007; Abbott, 2009). In this, the Wall itself functions much as the letters do in re-establishing both corporate and personal relationships.

In depositing their letters at the Wall, the widows are required to take some obvious actions. In the first event they must write the letter, then prepare themselves to organise their trip or 'pilgrimage' to the Wall¹⁷⁶. Once there they engage in a course of action, or ritual, which allows the letter to be released. In this process the letter becomes a bereavement 'object', not just a means of communication. The Wall is a place where the living and the dead meet in a socially, political and spiritually important setting.¹⁷⁷ It sets the social permission to allow the widows to make themselves vulnerable in a positive and safe arena. It permits them both a collective and an individual voice or expression for their loss and pain which, in itself, is evidence of empowerment and the freedom to grieve.

The writing of the letter, and ritual delivery and leaving of the letter are an intrinsic part of a teleogenic plot, in that there is no chronological framing or artificially imposed 'termination' of grief. Rather the life experiences of the women, their loss and pain, as well as the positive things they express, are continuous. The women provide the content and then become part of that content, in a demanding, challenging and dynamic process. In effect, the letters become 'fulcrums' in their grieving and in this, they are strongly evident not of closure or completion of a relationship but of a continuing, caring, loving and changing love: a continuing bond between widow and husband. Their delivery and placement is part of their construct.

¹⁷⁶ As Laurent's story shows this may take a considerable amount of time.

¹⁷⁷ See Teter's painting (Figure 6) and 'Meeting' (Figure 5)

The narratives that we create for the dead in various arenas evolve just as those for the living. Addressing this issue, Walter (2009: 145) suggests that stories about the dead work best for mourners when they are shareable and when others construct similar or compatible stories. This insight can be applied to what happens at the Wall, in that the letters can be seen as three distinct, but related, actions focused on a shared historical, social and cultural experiences and settings. They are a re-writing of the relationship narrative. This is not to suggest that the contents and emotion expressed are false, but that the relationship between the dead husband and bereaved wife has changed and continues to change over time.

This research suggests that the letters or notes are setting a personal story of grief, rejection and loss within a greater story of the Vietnam conflict. Carol Mithers contends of the Vietnam War that, *'not only did the reasons offered for the U.S. involvement appear too flimsy to support the weight of so much pain and death, the day to day reality of the war itself seemed insane and out of control'* (cited in Acton, 2007:12). The grief of the women became contested where they were caught between the anti-war discourse of protest and the conventional ideology of sacrifice, without the offer of any meaning in the death.

Seen in this context, the letters used in this research are not an external meeting between dead soldiers and their wives, but rather, as discussed earlier, grief narratives that take the form of a teleogenic plot within a shared culture of pilgrimage and 'gifting' of a significant object at the Wall that seeks to recover and integrate the past and the present (an action seen in objects left by other groups as well). Again, we see no finalisation or 'closure' rather a reinterpretation of the past in the light of the present. The narratives of the widows' lives and their relationship with their husbands continue, though there may be a temporary resolution, or chapter ending, that reflect the way continuing bonds (and the widows relationships) change and develop over time.

Pauline Laurent's narrative provides a very telling exploration of all of the themes picked up in the Widows chapter. She explores the necessity of personal story and the role of significant objects in a bereavement and loss process within a complicated and contested political vacuum that prohibits her ability to grieve. She writes of her relationship with her husband, Howard, shot in Vietnam; an event that was to define the rest of her life. Her story covers thirty years of often dysfunctional and unresolved loss. Her narrative,¹⁷⁸ made up of linking passages connected to a framework of letters to her dead husband, provides a case study of the experience of long-term grieving that finds some resolution, or at least understanding, in her eventual visit to the Wall to deposit the letters there some thirty years after her husband's death.

Laurent's letters¹⁷⁹ offer both a wider understanding of the use of narrative than the briefer single letters and more sustained evidence of the importance of narration and the sense of journey than we find in the other, single and more enclosed widows' letters from the last chapter. It does, however, clearly reference them and is unique to their conception and purpose, if not their structure. They evidence the way bereaved people may be capable of using objects to create fulcrums, or steps, in the experience of grief.

As we have seen in earlier chapters, bereavement theory has evolved considerably in recent years. The reliance on prescriptive stage models of 'recovery' and a pre-emptive focus on emotional responses to loss, unrelated to cognition, action and identity is no longer requisite (Niemeyer, 2007). Instead there is a growing sensitivity to different patterns of adaption as distinct functions of age, gender, culture and personal history. This pattern might be described as 'postmodern' (Walter, 1994), but actually finds its genesis in the uniqueness of the individual and in direct relation to their loss. This is not an argument for a totally individual and unique response to loss, but a demand for attention to the cultural and historical settings in relation to those situations and people

¹⁷⁸ Narrative is used here deliberately rather than 'story' to describe a greater complexity of mixed and subjective plots.

¹⁷⁹ I have deliberately switched from using Laurent's first name to her surname, from the earlier chapter, to allow a more detached and analytical approach to her narrative in the summary.

with due regard to an individual grief and the person, or phenomenon, who has been lost. Laurent's grief journey is a case in point.

Laurent's autobiography is used in this study because she represents her grief in terms of the prescriptive stage models of the time, recognised in the progression of the letters in her book, though not necessarily deliberately or consciously.¹⁸⁰ This inflexible and structured approach, reflecting the norms and pressures of her period, is present throughout Laurent's writing and has limited (this research has argued) her ability to express both her individuality and her singular response to Howard's death, a facet that also finds evidence in many of the veterans and other personal stories encountered later in this study.

Laurent (possibly unconsciously) forms a reconstruction of her relationship with Howard over a period of 30 years, using her letters to him and significant death related objects, to both vent her pain and reconnect to him (possibly reconstruct him) and in that, also her hurt, loss, personal betrayal and sense of purpose. This has been possible, because of changes in society in terms of the Vietnam experience over that time, that have allowed a greater acceptance of individual diversity in grieving that no longer depends on achieving 'closure'. This change has been, at least in part, both enabled and permitted by representations of the conflict through media, literature, films and television which has changed dramatically over the years since the ending of the conflict.

Laurent contends throughout the book that society, her country, her family and she herself, have all conspired to deny her grief and prevent her from finding meaning in her loss, leading to decades of pain and unresolved grief. This research suggests that alongside this, she is continually forging, or trying to forge, a continuing bond with Howard in direct opposition to the implied denial and, that herein, her emotional

¹⁸⁰ Email exchange between author and Laurent (23rd March 2010)

conflict establishes its complexity, an action that I have argued she shares with many different users at the Wall.

In the opening section and final chapter of her book,¹⁸¹ Laurent acknowledges and describes her 'pilgrimage' to the Wall and her 'releasing' of a letter written to and for her dead husband, and perhaps herself. The letter is a classic example of all the elements of a teleogenic plot.

The bereavement and loss events evident in all the letters she wrote to Howard are clearly compounded by the political and social implications of the Vietnam conflict. This process is shared in the other widows' letters, most clear in Cher's continued use of the term 'they' in attributing blame for Chuck's death and her longer term compounded loss, and in Carol's obvious anger in her derision of her country's oldest decoration.

The letters all reflect a social and political context, which is inextricably linked to the women's grief. The social and cultural complexities of the women's pain define the route they take to attempting to find meaning in their loss, which for all of them finds some fulfilment at the Wall. Both Laurent's letter and her autobiography as a whole, reflect her inability to articulate her grief due to the complexity of American society's reaction to the conflict, coupled with the shame of service in Vietnam. President Ford told his nation that it needed to 'forget Vietnam'; no wonder then that all the women have shown anger and a sense of repression in their grief. The need to address their loss and recover a relationship to, and with, their dead husbands is complex but clearly important to them.

All the women have been aided by a material structure in making sense of their loss, the Wall providing both a stimulus to writing and a repository for their letters, as well as a meeting place with their dead husbands, and other grieving widows. Supported by the

¹⁸¹ Typical of a teleogenic narrative.

open and positive composition of the teleogenic plot with the structure and content of their letters, the women have subconsciously and materially adopted an approach, which sequences and functions their developing continuing bonds. This approach is met, at least in part, in the actions and use of the Wall by the often embittered veteran's groupings.

Veterans

This study has demonstrated a linkage between veterans using and visiting the Wall, the objects they deposit there, the political nature of the role of the Wall and the associated traumatic implications of their service, which describes the evidence of grief and loss in this specific group. Commentators quoted in this research have, from different perspectives, explored the political and personal consequences of Vietnam Veterans post-war and with reference to the Wall, and provided a firm foundation for exploring the implications the conflicted relationships between state, veterans and the national guilt and emotional baggage encompassed at this site in the National Mall. All acknowledged the role of grief and loss as a key function of the Wall but none explored it beyond this simple statement.

In this regard, this study used grief models such as Parkes' psychosocial transitions in relation to 'assumed' understandings of self and society to provide a descriptor for the actions of Veterans at the Wall and the role of the Wall itself. Personal narratives, as with the Widows, were key determinants in this. And the work of authors such as O'Brien (1991, 1996) and Allen (1995) demonstrated that collections of objects deposited at the Wall evidence a continued narrative and bond directly to the dead and to the survivor's personal memory, and their reception back into a society that was alien and often hostile.

The Vietnam War was a tragedy for the United States. Public bitterness and disinterest made life difficult for many Veterans. American service men and women returned from Vietnam to a society that regarded the war as a mistake and the outcome as failure. A popular image of the Vietnam War Veteran arose of a deeply troubled and psychologically wounded man, condemned mentally and emotionally to the consequences and anguish of fighting, killing and dying. Shatan, a New York psychologist and psychoanalyst, suggested that some Veterans got worse the longer they were home, rather than better, proposing that survivors seemed to trust no one, and believed that anyone who wanted to try and help them was a liar. Shatan wrote, *'much of what passes for cynicism is really the Veteran's numbed apathy from a surfeit of bereavement and death'* (Shatan, 1973: 640). Shatan was the first to suggest that although PTSD was due to many different causes, at the heart of the Vietnam Veterans' experience was the consequence of bereavement and loss. Perhaps the most difficult loss was their own sense of self-identity and worth. The loss of personal identity and acceptance (personal and national) evidenced at the Wall and by the objects left there was one of the key findings of this research.

Given that 'self-identity' might be organised as a narrative construction, then the 'self' can be viewed as the dominant storyteller and therefore 'autobiographically structured'. In telling this story, the person gives special significance to particular events, or groups of events, which function as units of meaning (Sarbin, 1986: 33). This study has suggested that this 'restoring of self' is what is being resolved in the Veterans' rap (peer discussion) groups. They function as a continued bonding process (Unruh, 1983) to both their own identity and the people and situations that they lost. Throughout this research it has been argued that although verbal self-narrative is important, written letters left at the Wall and the assorted objects deposited there provide further means of 'narrating' one's grief, particularly when the use of verbal language is difficult. One of the veterans' key phrases heard still today day is 'you don't understand – you weren't there':

'This is not a story of war, except insofar as everything in my unsettled middle age seems to wind back to it. I know how much you dislike reading about it, all dissolution, failure, hackneyed ironies, and guilt, not to mention the facts themselves, regiments of them, armies. But I must risk being the bore at dinner for these few opening pages, for the life of the war is essential to the story I have to tell. And that is not about war at all but about the peace that followed the war' (Just, 1984: 12).

The Wall is deeply contested. It is an open memorial that has a multitude of users and agendas. Permission for the Wall to be built was only given on the understanding that it was to be an 'instrument of healing', bringing together those of all shades of opinion, persecution and belief in America (Scruggs & Swerdlow, 1992). There are those, such as Patrick Hagopian (2009), who are troubled by the political compromises that the Wall brings in 'fogging history' and preventing America facing its past and learning for the future. He describes a structure encased in the past, imprisoning its veterans and the American nation with the dead who are inscribed on it. This research demonstrates the opposite. The Wall is in constant flux and change, the four million visitors a year who use it are from a wide cross section of American society, most of whom were not even alive at the time of the Vietnam conflict. The exploration of cultural identity used in the concluding couplet chapters also contests Hagopian's view. The Wall is a deeply significant cultural object for the American people, which would not be the case if it were an emotional prison.

What cannot be contested is that the Wall has become a place of unique healing for the veterans. It forms a bridge between the living and the dead and permits a form of release for some and re-bonding for others. It has facilitated a potential 'sacred' space allowing many Veterans to 'fulcrum' their loss and move on with their own personal narratives through the objects they entrust to be preserved there.

Veterans' experience of grief and loss, expressed at the Wall utilising specific objects, finds relevance in Luttrell's experience of depositing a letter and photograph at the Wall. Using the framework of the teleogenic plot, this study has explored his twofold journey from that point, into his past to reconnect to his personal history and the narrative of his projection into the future. Resulting in a unique 'second' depositing of a MARS object with a Vietnamese family, this exploration using continuing bonds theory (Klass *et al*, 1996), psychosocial transition (Parkes, 1998), and narrative theories, including Heonik Kwon's (2008) 'ghost narratives', theorised the role of material culture and specific objects in helping a deeply distressed veteran to make sense of his experiences of grief and loss.

The Vietnamese call the conflict with the U.S. the 'American War' (1960-1975). This war was, factually, a civil war; it was equally viewed by many to be an American civil war (Kwon, 2008: 13):

'More divisive than any conflict Americans have engaged in since the Civil War (1860-65), the Vietnam war raised questions about the nation's very identity. These questions have not been settled. The battle over interpreting the Vietnam War is a battle over interpreting America and it continues to this very day' (Powell & Persico, 2001: 208).

The above quote from America's former leading general is significant in that Colin Powell acknowledges that the questions and the damage of the Vietnam War remain a significant question about who, and what, America is.

Charles Neu (2000) also observed that the war was waged not just on distant battlefields but also *'in the uncharted depths of the American psyche and in the obscurity of our nation's soul'* (Neu, 2000: 6). The scars of this conflict were not limited

to the Americans. There are significant similarities in the way that trauma, politics and material culture found expression in grief experienced by both sides of the conflict. Kwon (2008) suggests that in many ways the Vietnamese have followed a similar route to the U.S. experience. That now, a generation after the war has ended, they are discovering a new dimension of what has been. They are doing this through the official discourse, in an unambiguous and uncontested struggle of the unified nation against the memory of an aggressor but also through more personal and cultural spiritualities.

The phenomenon of war ghosts is intimately connected in both Vietnam and America in relation to the war. The Wall has a myriad of differing spiritualities represented there, including items from all the main religious groups and very strong totems from Native Americans. However, there is a significant minority who would insist that they 'literally' find the ghosts of the young men and women there (Duarte, 2002). This connection that crosses cultural boundaries finds an echo with the concept of both sides having undergone national 'civil wars', as Young (1999) suggests, with the associated intense pain and frequent loss of physical remains. This research has argued that both sides in the Vietnam War underwent similar death and loss experiences, and in both cases these experiences can be further illuminated through continuing bonds theory, material and narrative objects in specific relation to psychosocial transitions, in spite of the very different cultures involved.

Thus, these models have been applied alongside a cultural perspective. Specifically the loss of a human body to mourn (an absence) may be replaced, or mediated by an object left at the Wall. This is especially true if the object is directly related to the incident of loss or a personal item from the theatre of war and is therefore marked by specific invested memories, smells, or texture as well as function (Miller, 2008). This is evidenced by Laurent's box of her husband's items left at the Wall, in Luttrell's photograph returned to Vietnam, and Coppell's bracelets torn from her. The object then carries a totem of the person or loss, for instance the laying of the object at the

Wall for Laurent is not only an expression of re-bonding with her dead husband but also a means of saying goodbye, and the same is true of Duarte (2002) both in her fiction and in relation to her own dead brother inscribed on the Wall.

The first chapter in the second couplet showed examples of American veterans returning to Vietnam and discovering the similarities of this shared experience, often much to their own surprise (Galloway & Moore, 2008). None is more powerful than Luttrell's (who sadly died during the writing of this study) thirty year odyssey to return a photograph to Vietnam, begin to rid himself of his own nightmares and return Lunn's spirit home to his family. The Wall, as this research argues, plays a multifaceted role in U.S. society with political, cultural and personal expressions of loss, grief and anger articulated there. At its heart, though, are the Vietnam conflict and the men and women who served there. The most emotionally powerful of the many gifts left at the Wall come from these veterans.

On the basis of the research in these two chapters that form Couplet two, there appears to be a common experience at the Wall; one which expresses many different forms of loss, including loss of self, and reveals significant emotional investment in objects deposited there. I have argued that these are not simply 'linking' or 'transitional' objects, but evidence of a bridge between what Parkes describes as an internal and external assumed world. The use of objects by the veterans and the ongoing ritual of depositing them, over many decades and still a daily occurrence, are also strongly evocative of a continuing bond and the need to reconnect to the people, time and self that has been lost in the violence and trauma of the war.

Parkes, in a personal interview with the author specifically for this research, was convinced of the potency of 'attachments' in trauma and with particular reference to the Wall. He gave examples of conflicting understandings of attachment, explaining that these loose attachments, much like narrative threads in a story (my interpretation) are

fundamental to bereavement. He also emphasised that the said attachments were multifaceted and assumed, and often find their home in objects. Reflecting Miller's theories, Parkes suggested that the object could become part of an individual story of loss, a war story, a family story, a society's story and perhaps in the context of this research, a national story. In all of these stories, both 'continuing bonds' and 'psychosocial transition' are self-evident.

Contemporary Users

By examining the role of the Wall for certain groups of individuals today, this study has sought to draw attention to the way attitudes and assumptions about the Vietnam War have changed and evolved in the decades after the Wall's construction. A key focus of this research has been the changing nature of the American national narrative and America's conflicted cultural identity, ever subject to management and change. Key examples in this are the use of the AIDS quilt, which found its genesis in the Wall, and of specific objects placed at the Wall in managing loss and grief and as significant protest items. This finds a place with a 'usage of protest' associated with the National Mall and the Wall (Savage, 2009), beginning with the 'trashing' of Vietnam War medals during the late sixties' protest marches at the site now occupied by the Wall (Scott, 1996, 2004), to the leaving of Two 'Medals of Honour'¹⁸² (Allen, 1995) as political protests in recent years.

My research's proposed role of the Wall is one with which authors such as Murphy (2007), who positively asserts the Wall's sterile neutrality in all things, might not agree.¹⁸³ American political culture is often portrayed as one suffering from amnesia and it has been suggested that the media are compliant in the (proposed) ease with

¹⁸² Both Medals have been viewed by the author at the MARS repository. There is an accompanying letter with one protesting President Reagan's illegal support of Contra fighters in South America.

¹⁸³ Murphy's authoritative history of the Wall, although excellent, was commissioned and paid for by the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Committee who have a vested (Veteran based) interest.

which the U.S. public is forgetting important political facts. However, Sturken (1997: 2) suggests that this view of neutrality and 'forgetfulness' is superficial and instead proposes that American society is replete with cultural memory and narratives, and that this conception defines the cultural foundations that characterize the nation. The culture of mourning and melancholy has converged with the concepts of healing and closure that are central to American national identity. American mythology clings tenaciously to the belief that one can always heal, move on, and place the past in its proper context, and do so quickly. The memorial culture in the United States has been largely experienced as a therapeutic culture, in which particular citizens, primarily veterans and their families have been coming to terms with the past and making peace with difficult memories. This is the primary narrative generated by the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (Sturken, 2007: 14).

As this study has demonstrated, Sturken's (1997, 2007) argument is pervasive and relevant, but stems from a very narrow and conventional view of what happens at the Wall, centred upon her discipline of visual culture. Sturken significantly fails to engage with the four million visitors a year and the 150,000 stored objects left at the Wall, or the continued weekly use of the Wall in television, films and books, beyond an argument based upon personal visualisation and projection. She further fails to acknowledge the central role that the memorial has come to play in the nation's life. This research suggests that Sturken is right about the deep cultural narratives and memory replete in American culture, but that she fails to address the wider cultural and personal needs related to a loss process, in individuals, groups and wider society, being expressed at the Wall. This is, of course, inevitably political.

As this study has repeatedly shown, Americans frequently use visual stimuli to interact with cultural elements perceived as representative of their nation, particularly in events

related to trauma, where both the structures and fractures of a culture are exposed.¹⁸⁴ A strong visual culture, defined in this case by the Wall and its associated objects, allows oppositional politics and engagement with nationalism in a safe environment. National and personal narratives are conceived, challenged and changed by the ideologies represented, and perhaps by what happens, at the Wall.

Cultural narrative and story are produced through objects, images and representations. These modes of narration and description are not singular or passive in their function. They are vehicles through which memories are shared, produced and find meaning. An object or an image provides a representation of the past or present that may open a fissure between the memory of the event and the experience of seeing the image (Huysen, 1995). It is this juxtaposition that can produce the opportunity for the individual to change their position or view of the events, and allow political pressure or argument an opportunity:

'The small, individual acts of leaving objects, notes or flowers for a person, which have been practiced outside of the national arena for many decades at cemeteries or roadside shrines, became an aspect of national culture when visitors began to leave things at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial as a means of speaking to the dead. These gestures became a central part of the media coverage and coffee table books generated by the memorial' (Sturken, 2007: 104-105).

Sturken identifies a significant change in American cultural reaction to national trauma post- Vietnam, but she does not define how this loss is represented in psychological or sociological terms. She notes the need for the expression of grief and the route for that expression, but as with other authors writing about what happens at the Wall, such as Hass (1998), she does not explore how individual and national narratives of loss are

¹⁸⁴ Hass (1998), Schulzinger (2006) and Sturken (1997, 2007) all address this issue from different perspectives

expressed and processed. Yet, this shared experience of object gifting and emotional expression at the Wall, seated at the heart of American national power, is one of individual and group empowerment, focused through the process of being able to share both personal and corporate pain and loss in the face of the ruling political structure.

Through the sharing of stories, experiences and memories at the Wall and at the AIDS quilt, individuals participate in finding some meaning to the experience of loss, from the past into the present (Niemeyer, 2007). Although parts of the quilt travel across America, it can be said to embody a location, site and an image and in this, it is often perceived as a place where the survivors can find and speak to the dead (Sturken, 2007). Likewise, the 'Vietnam War Memorial' (Wall), symbolises the location of the nation's identity and narrative of the war. The Wall too, travels around America in the form of three 'mini Walls' that house all of the names inscribed on the larger Wall. They spend single days in various towns and cities where they are used in specific and corporate acts of remembrance, and in school and college educational days. The Wall is also a place where the living and dead meet, and the mobile Wall is frequently used for the 'Reading of Names' ceremonies, where all of the names are read by relays of readers. Both attest to the fact that continued bonds and shared stories can be located in specific places or objects. These spaces and objects do not however need to be fixed physically, but lend themselves to subjective use.

It is evidence of the complexity of U.S. culture in terms of material culture, that bereavement and loss narrative is produced not only at memorials but also through commodities. Theodor Adorno (cited in Terdiman, 1993: 12-13) suggests that specific and important objects could become containers of specific meaning and, as I have previously argued, that they also become possible fulcrums in the expression of bereavement and loss by the visitors to the Wall. Significantly, Adorno also suggests that the objects can be imbued with any meaning and this flexibility also finds expression at the Wall. In Western society, commercialization and marketing are pervasive, as is the

motivation towards aspiration in terms of material goods; hence, it should not be surprising to find that the emotional investment in inanimate objects (we invest in what we value), in a material culture, is not only common but also open to political manipulation.

When participating in rituals and the depositing of objects at the Wall, people do so both in opposition to and in concert with a concept of the 'nation' (Sturken, 1997). This peaceful¹⁸⁵ tension allows individuals to collectively uphold history. The traditional 'Wall' icons, its metaphors, objects, bonding rituals and narratives provide a structure for a collective consciousness or national subjectivity. Lauren Berlant (1991) suggests that this profoundly affects the citizen's subjective experience of their political views, but perhaps their political right to those views as well.

The process and rituals at the Wall and in the associated National Mall provide a means for the definition of what it might mean to be an American to be established, questioned and redefined. The AIDS quilt performs just such a function. It was laid out in the symbolic heart of the nation, the Mall, touching the Lincoln Memorial, the Washington Memorial and the Wall from which it drew much of its inspiration.

Both the Vietnam War and the AIDS epidemic are markers of what it means to be American at significant points in history. Both disrupted previously held and (arguably) nearly universally accepted beliefs about America. Both have altered the country's image nationally and internationally. The impact of both events will fade over time, yet some thirty-five years after the end of the Vietnam War, the Wall is still the most visited war memorial in the world, the MARS repository is receiving as many objects as ever – some 150,000 to date – and the AIDS quilt is continuing to grow. The stories, narratives and deeply needed and held, continuing bonds, are ingrained in national American

¹⁸⁵ Both pro-war activists and pacifists meet at and use the Wall. The MARS collection is staffed by curators who hold both views without rancour. This is a direct reflection of the Vietnam conflict where soldiers would have peace and drug symbols painted on their helmets whilst serving alongside regular fighting Marines and Troopers.

consciousness. Such powerful expressions of personal and corporate identities around loss are not only subject to political interpretation and usage, but also to the possibility of profound personal change.

As we have seen here and in previous chapters, the veterans and other user groups of the Wall require, to some degree, a sense of conclusion for some of the war narratives. This raises a number of issues. For some veterans there is an inability to 'let go', but for others (veterans and other groups) there is a sense of resolution, not closure. Laurent (1999) and others have shown that narratives found at the Wall have chapter endings rather than completions. Grief and loss are processed and expressed and, to different degrees and for different reasons, both veterans and others continue a bond, but express a transition.

The ownership of the changing narratives of the Vietnam War Memorial is conflicted and subject to the politics of memory. This has been the case since its inception and still remains. The Wall functions to permit all to express their experience of war and as the Aids Quilt has shown, loss and grief, in the wider context. The Wall facilitated the emergence of the voices of veterans, families, friends, war protestors and minority groups who, arguably, sit in opposition to the media and government, and are thereby powerful in helping to change that political/social climate and attitude. Certainly, as the Hollywood films have shown, it has facilitated the development of a challenging and changing narrative.

Sturken (1997, 2007) suggests that the Wall, at least in part, achieves this by acting as a screen that allows the projections of narratives and stories to be played out. The Wall, of course, does not endorse any of the conflicted narratives deposited there, but significantly it does allow, and promote, expression of those narratives. The (honoured) names on the Wall, and the implicit condemnation implied, has allowed the Wall to function as a catalyst for re-writing, and re-telling the pain, loss and hurt of the war in a

safe and open environment. Within this structure, 'healing' and reconsideration of the war has been both allowed and encouraged to develop, which has led to different and sometimes conflicted arguments and resolutions about the Wall to be achieved. This process has not led to direct conflict, but to a mutually held respect from differing users of the Wall, even when the parties are diametrically opposed.

The Wall is both a compliant and resistant object. It does serve as a point for reflection and mediation, but in doing this, it is also a focus and backdrop for conflicting voices and opposing agendas. The multiplicity of meanings implicit at the Wall, and in the function of depositing objects there, does not subject the memorial to devaluation. Rather, it provides a place that is accepting and open, and where the users' emotional responses to dreadful or chaotic situations find acceptance and value. Here, people (and groups) are safe to grieve, cry and express their anger. The Wall sits in the centre of these conflicted narratives and, to some degree, sanctions them. It also permits change. These various rituals experienced at the Wall might be described as 'liminal', allowing the users to cross from one identity or status to another (Doka, 2002: 135).

The Wall, however is not a neutral 'cure all' as has frequently been suggested implicitly by much of the literature surrounding it.¹⁸⁶ People who come to it hurt often leave hurt. The Wall has no magic or independent identity. It begins and ends with people and their stories. National, political narrative can be interwoven into these personal post-war stories as we have seen in developed themes found in Laurent's story and Cottrell's journey, grief and loss narratives can, in turn, be invested in objects. Significantly in this respect such investment can be found in the POW/MIA bracelets, in direct relation to an overwhelming, complex and conflicted political situation. Coppel's story shows how political interference may impact on grieving, in this case interfering with attempts to make peace with long-held and painful memories, or the forming of continuing bonds with dead loved ones through a significant object. In direct opposition to what

¹⁸⁶ Ashabranner & Ashabranner (1998) are a case in point, amongst many others and even Palmer's (1988) excellent book also takes this view

happened to the various 'bracelet' organisations, this research shows why the essential neutrality (founded in the public ownership) of the Wall, as well as its contrasting functions of resistance and compliance, have become so important to U.S. culture in the face of political manipulation and even lies.

When people participate in rituals and deposit objects at the Wall, they do so both in opposition to, and in concert with, a concept of the national unity (Sturken, 1997). The traditional 'Wall' icons – metaphors, objects, bonding rituals and narratives – provide a structure for a collective consciousness and national subjectivity; but, as we see, are also subject to manipulation. Lauren Berlant (1991) suggests that this manipulation may affect the user's subjective experience of their political views and, perhaps, their political right to those views as well. Political conflict, and possibly manipulation, has certainly been attempted at the Wall, but has been far more significant in what has happened to the individual people around it.

Gloria Coppin represents a sector of society who were brutally damaged by their well meant contribution to the war debate. Carol Bates, on the other hand, had a different experience. This research used Bates' wider narrative both as a foil for Coppin's experiences, but also as a descriptor of the role that national power had in the Vietnam War, its aftermath, the Wall, the objects left there and the loss and grief ordinary people.

Developing this argument, the last couplet of chapters explored the impact of the Wall on the way American culture has responded to death and loss in the years since its inception. The significance of the role that the Wall provides, both for groups and individuals, may be found in its drawing attention to the way attitudes and assumptions about the Vietnam War have changed and evolved in the decades after the Wall's construction, as well as conversely becoming more entrenched in some circumstances. Key is the national narrative and conflicted cultural identity found at the Wall invested

in objects, including the objects' associated narratives, political inference and potential for manipulation. This concept of dynamic purpose at the memorial finds further expression in the development of the AIDS quilt, which found its genesis in the Wall, and of a range of objects placed at the Wall, in managing loss and grief, and also – albeit in a politically opposite direction – in the POW/MIA conflicted narrative, which is symbolically represented in the bracelets, thousands of which have been left at the Wall.

The complexity of U.S. cultural items and representations is evidence that bereavement and loss narrative is produced not only at memorials, but also through commodities and in often confused visual imagery. As previous shown, Adorno is supportive of this position, suggesting that specific and important objects might be emotional containers of specific meaning and, as I have argued, in that they also become possible fulcrums in the expression of bereavement and loss by the visitors to the Wall. Significantly, Adorno further suggests that objects can be imbued with any meaning. It should not be surprising then, to find that emotional investment in inanimate objects, in a material culture, is not only common, but also open to political consideration. This, I would argue is precisely what happened to Coppin's bracelets and the wider MIA/POW issue represented by flags, drawings, letters and personal visits to the Wall, which still take place on a daily basis.¹⁸⁷

The process and rituals at the Wall and in the associated National Mall provide a means for determining, questioning and reinterpreting the definition of what it might mean to be an American. It allows an interpretation, or perhaps even a creation of national and personal narrative to establish identity and meaning, the loss of which, in so many ways, is a significant consequence of the Vietnam War.

¹⁸⁷ Evidenced in the weekly emptying of containers of objects left at the Wall, witnessed by the author, February 2010

In this regard, Coppin provides a very singular experience of loss, in relation to the war period, and, to some degree, exemplifies the many different expressions of loss and pain expressed at the Wall. Clearly there are as many stories associated with the Vietnam War, the politics, myths and conflicted identities, as there are objects deposited at the Wall. Nonetheless, what Coppin's story contributes to this research is an example of popular American culture linked to a destructive relationship with the effects of the conflict, finding expression, relief and an eventual coming to terms with, and perhaps re-bonding to, its collective, and singular, past.

American Culture and the Wall

Maureen Ryan (2008) wrote:

'In fact, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial on the Mall in Washington D.C., surely the most visible national icon of the war and its aftermath, is an ideal illustration of the country's ongoing negotiation of the war's meaning' (Ryan 2008: 8).

Ryan goes on to suggest that the development and unveiling of the Wall (1977-82) coincided with the first wave of cultural narratives about the war. Competing claims on the monument (and therefore the War) emerged in the contested design and the development of the statues. The fact that the designer was an Asian, female student only compounded the controversy.

In 1994 Gustav Niebuhr, in the New York Times¹⁸⁸ said:

¹⁸⁸ 11th Nov 1994 [http: www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com), accessed 2nd December 2009.

'for years the Vietnam Veterans memorial has drawn more visitors than either the Washington Monument or the Lincoln Memorial. It has become a sacred shrine, where pilgrims come and devotions are paid... That the Wall would become a hallowed site was not what the monuments creators envisioned. Here's essentially what is designed to be a military memorial commemorating people who took part in a military effort, and it's been transformed into a national shrine where all these feelings come alive'.

Confirming this unreserved and inclusive connotation of the Wall, countless American narratives of the Vietnam War conclude with a powerful, if sometimes sentimental and healing pilgrimage to the Wall. *In country, the names of the Dead* and countless other films and books such as Stella Pope Durate's, (2002) *'Let Their Spirits Dance'* where an entire family makes a pilgrimage to the Wall for very different personal reasons, as well as their shared grief. In Wayne Karlin's (1998) book *'Prisoners'* his lead character 'Amerasian' see's *'Daddy, Daddy, Daddy'*, 58,108 times in the names on the Wall (Karlin, 1998: 99). When she looks into the book that directs one to the correct panel (what Karlin, calls 'the phone book of the dead') she finds not only her father's name but her own. In the final clip of *'In Country'*, Sam says, *'It's like all the Names in America have been used to decorate that Wall'* (Ryan, 2008: 9).

Since its inception, the Wall (with the laying of the Purple Heart) has been linked to national and personal narratives of pain, loss, and forms of acceptance. It is not surprising that many of these grief and loss narratives find expression in letters and photographs in what Sturken (1997, 2007) describes as a projection or a screen. What is important about the Wall is the way that these hurt narratives which, this research has shown, frequently cannot be verbally expressed or written down, find expression and value in the deposited objects left at the Wall. All of the American people own the Wall and the pain, humiliation and grief expressed there, and this makes it a safe place for

the expression of wordless loss. This finds direct expression in the individual choices (and national valuing) of the objects placed there.

In O’Nan’s (1996) *Names of the Dead*, Vicky cannot understand why, thirteen years after his tour in Vietnam her husband Larry still treasures his Vietnam photographs and spends his time leading a disabled Veterans support group:

‘You got to stop wallowing in it. It’s like religion to you... you torture yourself with it. That’s what your group at the hospital’s all about – keeping it fresh. God forbid that you should talk to me’. Larry replies, ‘You don’t want to hear it... you think if you pretend it doesn’t exist I will forget about it’ (O’Nan, 1996: 365).

When O’Brien’s (1991) ‘grunts’ tramp through the jungle in *The Things They Carried* they hump comic books, mine detectors, ammunition, M&M’s and all the ambiguities of Vietnam. Amongst all the essentials they also carry little plastic cards imprinted with the code of conduct (Ryan, 2008). This contains the ‘ten commandments’ of what to do if captured. The code mandates resistance to captors, a duty to escape, refusal of special privileges, complete loyalty to the American nation and other prisoners of war and to trust in God. Conditions of capture for an enlisted man would include torture, impossibility of escape, no contact with officers, and knowledge that to refuse to co-operate with the North Vietnamese would result in death:

‘The vast majority of POWs were guilty of violating the code of conduct. The ones who refused to give the North Vietnamese anything but name, rank and number didn’t come home’ (Grant, 1994: 341).

I would suggest that the code represented one more object that the grunts carried and one more lie that they had to live with and, in that, frequently one more object associated with loss and betrayal left at the Wall.

Phillip Caputo (1999) recognised that the Vietnam War would be '*the dominant event in the life of my generation*' (Caputo, 1999: xx). The powerful combat and personal narratives that followed Caputo's early book affirm his premise that the war in Vietnam, more than any other twentieth century event would define America. Complementing the diverse interpretations of those who served in Vietnam are sundry, memoirs, films, biographies, political histories and personal stories of those affected by the acrimonious home front during the long years of the conflict. The innumerable Americans whose lives were touched, destroyed, or profoundly changed by it, testify to the reverberating significance of the war in America, well beyond the jungles of Vietnam and long after the M-16s and boonie hats had disappeared into musty khaki-coloured trunks (Ryan, 2008).

The violent drama of the combat experience is complemented by comparably disruptive events on the home front: assassinations of liberal leaders, urban riots, protest deaths on U.S. campuses and political lies, conceit and corruption; all of which carry a range of diverse and often differing narratives (Schulzinger, 2006).

Yet, despite the breadth and the diversity of these conflicted narratives, prevailing themes emerge with interesting consistency: loss, waiting wives, forsaken children, post traumatic stress, political alienation, rejection, death, objects, significant things, and sometimes, resolution all have their place. They might all be summarised as a 'quest for meaning' (Ryan, 2008). That 'meaning' no longer includes blaming those who served. Americans have learned, since the traumatic Vietnam era, not to blame the warrior for the war. They are more willing than ever to exonerate the anti-warrior. The monument and the objects deposited there are part of this meaning making process (Seale, 2003).

Whist it reflects contemporary opinion, at the Wall there is peace and an open, accepting space which does not judge.

Central to all of this are the individual stories. They contain hurt, love, joy, pain, and sometimes death. In relation to the objects, this research suggests that nearly all of them carry significant motives of loss. This vibrant collection of cultural narratives represented in material objects captures the traumatic and dramatic stories of combat in Vietnam and conflict at home. The legacy of the Vietnam War has *'leaked into the matrix...we are all at the party'* (Karlin, 1998: 104). All of the authors and contributors to this study have affirmed that everyone in America fought in the Vietnam War, and fight it still (Ryan, 2008).

'History and how the public know about it, gets distilled and frozen in iconic objects like the Wall. Popular perception of historical events somehow needs to be rendered into an icon that people can tuck away and when they see that, it stands for myriad other things. It's what symbols are; it's the importance of mythology and how myths work.'
(Murphy, 2007: 172)

Murphy suggests that the Wall became embraced as an icon from its earliest stages. The groundbreaking and the unveiling were covered by national television, prompting a national response that was not long in coming. The Wall spoke of America's values and sense of patriotism (no matter which side of the war people stood on). As the Wall secured iconic status, as this research has shown, it facilitated its own reinvention; this reinvention and re-remembering, is what accounts for the shifting historical narrative surrounding the Vietnam War and the Wall.

'At first the war was universally bad. Then in the 1990's and 2000's, it has moved 180 degrees, with the notion of the veteran as a hero or

unsuspecting victim that supplants the notion of the bad war. For veterans it can be difficult to see the shift, they often don't see how dramatic the change has been in that perception. What they remember is what's painful, the fact that they were ignored. In terms of the valorization of the veteran which came later, they don't really buy that concept in the absence of seeing example after example.' (Murphy, 2007: 172)

There are in fact hundreds, if not thousands of examples found in pop culture of the use of the Wall as an icon and the veteran as a heroic example.¹⁸⁹ Notwithstanding this, Murphy is typical of many authors writing directly about the Wall in that there is a tendency to describe things primarily from the veteran's perspective. This is understandable given that Murphy's book is sponsored by a Vietnam Veterans organisation, but it is not accurate in terms of being singular to that group alone. The 'widows' chapter reveals that the experience of alienation was felt just as much by the families, as does Laurent's story (1999). The difficulties and contradictions found at the Wall and in the war, affected the whole of American society and many people who did not fight had their own situations to deal with. Many who fled to Canada or risked imprisonment for refusing to fight also felt rejected and lost in a world that despised them for being cowards (Appy, 2008). Those who served and hated the war and were ostracized and often assaulted on protest marches, creating a sense of alienation. People like Coppin, who supported the war and the soldiers, felt an incredible sense of betrayal from the way the country was governed during the war. The veterans, it might be argued, are the most significant users of the Wall but today, they are also now the minority represented there.

This may not be a bad thing. All the authors whom I have encountered having written about the Wall would agree that the existence of the Wall helped to open up lines of

¹⁸⁹ An internet search conducted on the 24th January 2011, using Google, resulted in over 300 different references.

communication and discussion about the War, as well as forming a focus for understanding, coming together and healing. The war ceased to be a taboo subject and became an open communication or 'communion', as Powell (1995) has it. The conflicts and debates did not end, indeed they rage still, but there developed a freedom to safely question and individualise the war and the situations that surrounded it, not least in the freedom of choice in material objects deposited there. The war has become 'postmodern'. The result was a dramatic increase in the memorabilia materials that expressed popular culture: books, films, comics, badges, uniforms, mugs, even the Wall's own hat and scarf; the Wall has its own logo now.¹⁹⁰ The expression of the war, its history and aftermath are not largely a product of the books read by the American public but by their experience through popular culture (Sturken, 2007; Murphy, 2007). This has an obvious relevance in the process of gifting and mediating loss through material objects at the Wall.

As the Wall gathered in iconic status, Hollywood frequently used it to make a statement. The Wall became a visual clue to the audience; it came to represent a hurt period and a reflective approach to the war that accepted the pain and the damage done whilst promoting a considered and healing reconciliation with the past.¹⁹¹ In his book for 'Time Life', Meyer (1993) looks at just one day in the life of the Wall and the people who visit it. The daylight reveals a Hollywood film crew shooting Sharon Stone, walking the Wall in reflective pose recalling her personal loss. Ten years later Mel Gibson, portraying Major General Hal Moore (*We were Soldiers Once*), does exactly the same thing; as does Peter Snow (*Twentieth Century Battlefields*) another ten years on. This function of Icon projection is not just limited to film making. My Washington hotel shop, occupying

¹⁹⁰ The author was sent an (unsolicited) Hat and Scarf from the Vietnam War Memorial Organisation with embossed 'Wall' motive, Christmas 2010

¹⁹¹ During January 2011 on British Television I saw the Wall used this way no less than five times, in the films: *We were soldiers Once & Coming Home*; *American Chopper*; *Twentieth Century Battlefields & NCIS*.

a tiny space, found room to display and sell plastic models of the Wall entitled *'The Healing Wall – Never Forget them.'*¹⁹²

The Wall is keenly represented within the nostalgia industry. Fredrick Heart's statue of the three soldiers, adjoining the Wall, inspired representations including posters, T-shirts, a Franklin Mint miniature and a plastic model kit. Some banks offer their customers the option of having their cheques embossed with the Wall's image. The U.S. postage service has used the Wall's image twice; first in 1984, two years after its unveiling, when the image used was a fairly standard photographic image of the Wall in black and white; and then again in 2000, featuring 'crying veteran', when it was selected by the general public in a competition and features (see veterans chapter). Many veterans strongly resist what they see as their story being retold in popular culture and Murphy (2007), in his fulsome twenty-five year history of the Wall, specifically warns against this. Nonetheless, the Wall is not about just about those who served and those who died. As this research has demonstrated, it is about American culture, history, power, loss and her people – all of them. It is impossible to exclude popular and material culture, not least because the veterans themselves are a part of it.

Jan Scruggs who led the campaign for the Wall and remains its leading advocate said:

'Wherever you go – Beijing, Dublin, Berlin, Mexico City – the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, or "the Wall", is an instantly recognisable symbol of America. That says a lot about how important this memorial is to our culture. One of the things I've come to know about the Wall is that no matter how many times you go there, it's different every time; the story is never finished' (Murphy, 2007: 179).

¹⁹² Later I found the same model cast in silver in an exclusive Mall, which was considerably more expensive.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Conclusions

This study has explored the relationship between bereavement, loss, the politics of the post-Vietnam experience and the objects deposited at the Wall. The actions of depositing and 'gifting' of objects at the Wall, I argued, can be understood through the careful application of bereavement theory including 'continuing bonds' (Klass *et al*, 1996), 'continuing bonding activity' (Unruh, 1983), 'story and narrative' and 'psychosocial transition' (Parkes, 1998).

The Wall has become a focus for reflection on a traumatic and unhealed war, with all that it meant for a deeply divided America and defeat overseas. With four million visitors a year it is impossible to identify all of the users, or indeed to see any of them as 'typical'. However, it has been possible to establish a contextualised understanding of grief and loss expressed through the leaving of specific objects at the Wall. Through careful exploration, it has also been possible to identify how various objects relate to personal and group narratives and identities, and how these objects are used to 'fulcrum' loss. This exploration has involved the application of a number of different theories to the relationship between 'loss' and 'objects' in relation to specific objects at the Wall, rather than the generalised understandings of authors such as Hass (1998), Hagopian (2009) and Sturken (1997, 2007).

In the widows' letters and other literature reported in this study, there is evidence of continuing bonding activity in the ritual release of letters at the Wall over a period of time. Laurent's letters, in particular, show that such activity can sometimes only be achieved in a mutually supportive group found at a safe, ritual site where the individual's contribution and narrative of hurt and rejection can be acknowledged, honoured and valued. The widows have been aided by a material structure in making

sense of their loss. The Wall has provided both a stimulus to writing and a repository for their letters, as well as a place where the living and the dead meet. By applying the concept of a teleogenic plot to the structure and content of their letters, it has been possible to capture the way that the women have subconsciously and materially adopted an approach which sequences and functions their developing continuing bonds. This approach is met, at least in part, in the actions and use of the Wall by the sometimes embittered veteran's groupings.

The Wall provides a site where the implications of the conflicted relationships between State, veterans, national guilt and emotional baggage can be engaged. Many of the authors cited in this research, such as Schulzinger (2006), Scruggs & Swerdlow (1992), Breende (1998), Jeffreys-Jones (1999), Sturken (1997, 2007) and Ashplant (2006) (if from different perspectives), acknowledge and affirm the role of grief and loss as a key function of the Wall, but none have explored it beyond this simple statement.

In this regard, this study has used grief models such as Parkes' psychosocial transitions in relation to 'assumed' understandings of self and society. This has provided a means of interpreting the actions of Veterans at the Wall and the role of the Wall itself. Personal narratives of the Veterans, as with the Widows, were key determinates in this. The work of authors such as O'Brien (1990, 2006) and Allen (1995) have demonstrated that collections of objects deposited at the Wall evidence not only a continuing narrative and bond with the dead, but also an expression of the survivors' personal memories and self-identities, not least in their reception by a society that was frequently alien and hostile. In this, the veterans have provided the clearest and most direct 'bereavement to object' linkage and have demonstrated that the depositing and gifting of these objects has a clear role, not only in continuing a bond, but also in expressing a transition.

'The construction of an identity for the veterans since their return from the war has become the most present and continuing narrative of the memorial.' (Sturken in Murphy, 2007: 155)

This study has explored the Wall in relation to the way American culture has responded to death and loss stemming from the War. Both for groups and individuals, the Wall has become a place where attention can be drawn to attitudes about the Vietnam War and the people who fought in it. The Wall is a place where conflicted accounts and perspectives are expressed, not only through the objects left there, but also through acts of remembrance or defiance that are acted out within its perimeters. For example, the concept of the AIDS quilt, seemingly not connected directly with the Vietnam War, found its genesis at the Wall. By the same token, a range of objects placed at the Wall express the highly conflicted narrative about those deemed to be POW or MIA through the depositing of bracelets, thousands of which have been left at the Wall.

This research has demonstrated that specific and important objects are 'hollowed out'; becoming containers for specific meaning and in turn fulcrums for the expression of bereavement and loss by the visitors to the Wall. Significantly, Adorno (cited in Terdiman 1993: 12-13), among others, suggests that objects can be imbued or invested with any meaning, or as this research has suggested, used to carry individual or corporate narratives of death or loss. It should not then be surprising to find emotional investment in inanimate objects, not only common, but also open to political consideration. This, I would argue, is precisely the case in relation to Coppin's bracelets and the wider MIA/POW issue represented by flags, drawings, letters and personal visits to the Wall, still taking place on a daily basis.

The actions and rituals at the Wall and in the associated National Mall provide a means for determining, questioning and reinterpreting the definition of what it might mean to be an American. It allows an interpretation, or perhaps even a creation of national and

personal narrative to establish identity, the loss of which, in so many ways, is a significant consequence of the Vietnam War. In this regard, Coppin provides a singular experience of loss in relation to the war period, but also, to some degree, illustrating the many different expressions of loss and pain found at the Wall.

Clearly there are as many stories associated with the Vietnam War, the politics, myths and conflicted identities, as there are objects deposited at the Wall. However, Coppin's story also contributes to this research an example of popular American political culture, linked to a destructive relationship with the effects of the conflict, which finds expression and acceptance of its collective and singular past. As with so many narratives at the Wall, there is no resolution here, the pain of loss remains raw for many Wall visitors. Yet, in spite of the ongoing expression of loss and pain, these narratives would demonstrate that a continuing bond to the past (to one's own story) is not only necessary but potentially healing.

Caputo's (1999) work affirms the premise that the war in Vietnam, more than any other twentieth century event, defines America. The reverberating significance of the Vietnam War continues to be expressed through memoirs, films, biographies and political histories. It resides in the personal stories of those affected by the acrimonious home front during the long years of the conflict and the innumerable Americans whose lives were changed, destroyed, or profoundly challenged by it. The echoes of the War extend well beyond the jungles of Vietnam and can be heard long after the M-16s and boonie hats disappeared into musty khaki-coloured trunks, or ultimately found a new home in the MARS Wall Collection.

Yet, despite the breadth and the diversity of these conflicted narratives, certain themes prevail and emerge with interesting consistency. These include loss, waiting wives, forsaken children, post-traumatic stress and political alienation. Rejection, death, objects and sometimes, resolution, all have their place. Their expression might all be

summarised as a 'quest for meaning'. However, that 'meaning' no longer includes blaming those who served. Americans have learned, since the traumatic Vietnam era, not to blame the warrior for the war, they are more willing than ever to exonerate the anti-warrior. The monument and the objects deposited at the Wall are part of this meaning-making process. Whilst contemporary opinion, mores and attitudes are found at the Wall, there is also peace and an open, accepting space that does not judge the user.

Central to all that goes on at the Wall are the individual people and their stories of hurt, love, joy, pain, and sometimes death. In relation to the objects, this research suggests that nearly all of them carry significant motifs of loss. This vibrant collection of cultural narratives represented in material objects captures the traumatic and dramatic stories of combat in Vietnam and the conflict at home. All of the authors and contributors to this study have affirmed that, everyone in America who lived through the conflict years, fought in the Vietnam War, and to some degree, fight it still.

Potential for Further Research

This study has been limited to exploring the complexity of actions at the Wall with regard to loss. It has sought to evidence a link between the depositing of objects at the Wall to continuing bonds theory and continuing bonding activity. These actions have been shown to be manifest in both the singular personal stories of individuals at the Wall, and with the larger, social and political narratives of loss, betrayal and alienation as well as the (increasingly) more positive action found at the site.

It has been beyond the scope of this thesis to explore the relationship of objects beyond the spectrum of the specific circumstances and actions encountered at the Wall. Nonetheless, it is significant that the engagements found at the U.K. equivalent of the

Wall (The National Arboretum) are very different in their expression of loss and bereavement, although this may change over time. Nevertheless, the laying of objects at memorials such as the Cenotaph and the Seven/Seven memorial in Hyde Park, as well as the significant actions at roadside memorials, ghost bikes and at gravesides offer real opportunities to study social and culture-specific aspects of bereavement and loss in different contexts.

What this research has shown is that the Wall is unique; during the sixties many commentators felt that America was on the brink of civil war and had experienced a degree of social unrest not seen since the 1860-65 civil war. The situation and loss of a national identity and 'manifest destiny' was evident and obvious; for the first time in living memory, for many of the U.S. public, America was not the 'good guy'. For the veterans returning from the conflict, in contrast to the World War II veterans, the intensity of the crises at home created a dangerous rupture between so many citizens and their nation. This forced questions about the significance of those who had died, about lost identity, and about what it meant to be American. This was the crucible that forged the Wall and explains its cultural significance.

The Wall is said to 'have a heart'. Hass describes it as the world's only 'truly living memorial' (Hass, 1998: 89). This is because it is transformed daily by the medals, love letters, bottles of beer and single high heeled shoes that are left there. It is a place where the living meet the dead, and face intense personal and national losses. It is a place to say 'goodbye' and 'hello', a place to release, and a place to re-bond. It has no answers and can make no promises, but it has become an icon of healing and reconciliation in the face of often overwhelming loss. In this, it is with its offerings, unique.

On a black February night with the air temperature well below -20C and accompanied by light snow flurries, I sat on a park bench keeping vigil at

the Wall, whilst ice formed on the outside of my coat. The Wall had only seen a few visitors after midnight and I was preparing to return to my hotel room, when I saw that in the darkness, I had missed something. There was a large grey shape at the centre of the Wall. When I approached I saw that it was an old army canvas rucksack. It was filled with rocks and had a note pinned to the lid which read: 'I have carried you for over forty years; I don't need to carry you any longer'.

(Adapted from my personal journal: February 26th 2009)

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