



THE MEMORIALIZATION OF THE VIETNAM WAR: A CULTURAL LEGACY OF THE 1960'S COUNTERCULTURE?

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“Sometimes remembering will lead to a story, which makes it forever. That’s what stories are for. Stories are for joining the past to the future... Stories are for eternity, when memory is erased, when there is nothing to remember except the story.”¹

Telling and representing History falls not just on historians but a multiple of actors brought together. Memorials are relevant to that representation, at a national level, provided that they may be defined as “privileged site of recollection.”² At the National Mall in Washington D.C. for instance the Washington Memorial, the Jefferson Memorial or again the Lincoln Memorial conjure up an ideal America, and elicit pride rooted in the notion of American exceptionalism. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Memorial is another symbol that extols America’s ability to overcome divisions and move forward with one’s divided past, America’s aptitude for progress. When it comes to war memorials, state governments drive most projects, and more often than not the codes of the nationalistic approach and purpose have to be abided. In other words, war memorials must fit a “grand narrative,” a glorious history of the nation that partakes of collective memory, highlighting the interconnection between politics and memory.

To that regard, the case of the Vietnam War (1964-1973) deserves attention. It was a highly divisive war, heavily politically charged, polarizing hawks and doves as never before

¹ Tim O’Brien, *The Things They Carried*, New York, Penguin Books, 1991; p. 35.

² Elizabeth Bronfen on war films, in Daniel Binns, *The Hollywood War Film, Critical Observations from World War I to Iraq*, UK, Intellect Bristol, 2017.

and it split Americans on what it meant to be “patriotic.” The Vietnam War conveys a traumatic meaning, conjures up painful memories of division, horror and waste, haunting US collective memory in the manner of a specter. So, if when trying to apprehend the meaning of a memorial one is confronted with the question of collective memory and the representation of that memory, when considering the Vietnam War Memorial at the National Mall in Washington D.C., one faces an even greater challenge. Coming to terms with the war has proven a difficult task. This war “has remained stored in the eyes of America” writes American historian Marilyn B. Young in *The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990*, and thus America has been fixated on the Vietnam War in an almost pathological way.³ Clear evidence of that is the fact that the Vietnam War has been exposed on TV, documentaries, photographs, newspapers and magazines, movies and novels in an “accumulative effect of horrendous images,” shaping collective memories even as it was unfolding.⁴ It also occurred at a time when faith in the institutions and the government was shaken deeply; the war was actually one of the factors for this. The decade questioned the mainstream narrative, and conventional values were dissolving into emerging alternatives heralded by what is called the counterculture, while the counterculture was fueled by Vietnam. The Vietnam War and the Sixties are indeed intertwined, inseparable, defining each other.

Designing a memorial for the Vietnam War was henceforth a delicate matter. In 1980, a contest was launched and in May 1981, Maya Lin, an art student at Yale University, won. The simplicity of the project made a strong impression on the committee. It is made of polished black granite arranged in a V-shape “merging gently with the sloping earth”⁵; the names of the 58,196 soldiers who died in Vietnam and those of the missing are inscribed on it in a chronological order, in the order in which they died in Vietnam. The committee had insisted the monument should be apolitical, and neither celebratory nor heroic, and Lin’s design fitted these requirements, or so it seemed. However, considering the cultural and social impacts of the 1960’s, it seems only inevitable that the Memorial should capture some of its paradigms—the defiance, the critical onlook at society and conventions—, in short everything that led to that war. Hence, this paper suggests that the Memorial Wall may be as much a product of the Sixties as it is of the war, promoting a diverging recollection and memorialization.

To assess the impact of the Sixties on the memorialization of the War in Vietnam, we must first contextualize the memorialization itself and examine the fractured context of the

³ *The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990*. New York, HarperCollins Publishers, 1991; p. 329. Young, a Professor at New York University, was known for her anti-war and feminist positions.

⁴ Barbara Kowalczyk, “From Vietnam, VA, to Iraq, CA: The Spectrality of Violence in An-My Lê’s *Small Wars and 29 Palms*,” *Sillages critiques* URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/sillagescritiques/4861>, retrieved on December 17, 2017.

⁵ Kristin Ann Hass, *Carried to The Wall: American Memory and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1998; p.17.

project and the environment in which veterans, politicians and Americans were trying to come to terms with a war that fragmented the nation. This assessment provides the background to investigate whether patriotic considerations reshaped the memorialization of the war: the second section discusses to what extent the attempts at unifying the nation gave way to a new piece of the grand American narrative, while the last section considers whether the Memorial and what the public made of it transcended nationalistic purposes. This paper thus aims to demonstrate that it offers an alternative, not as a “counter-American way of Life,” but a “counter representation of war,” or at least a “significant deviation.”⁶

1. The Wall: Contextualization, Memorialization and Collective Memory

Memorials aim primarily to represent a seminal event in the history of a nation, an episode to collectively remember that underlies the construction of the nation and national identity. War memorials more specifically can also be read as representing a “specter.” In “Spectrographies,” Jacques Derrida contends that the “specter is first and foremost something visible. It is of the visible, but of the invisible visible, it is the visibility of a body which is not present in flesh and blood.”⁷ At the time of their memorialization, wars are indeed specters: they are no more but still achingly present either physically—a devastated land, the wounded—or psychologically. The paradox of this *invisible visibility* may be even truer for the Vietnam War since it was fought on a distant land and no homecoming parades for veterans were organized, as if to erase their deeds, while novels, documentaries, movies, etc. about Vietnam permeated popular culture. But the specter in Derrida’s words has no material nature. How to materialize and remember it then? How to produce an object of memory of such a war and fit it in an American collective memory that was fractured by Vietnam?

Indeed, the process of memorialization (*i.e.* the act of remembering) is linked to the “collectivity,” meaning a group of individuals, here the American people, sharing common memories and representations. American philosopher Pr. Edward S. Casey explains that collective memory “is the circumstance in which different persons, not necessarily known to each other at all, nevertheless *recall the same event*—again, each in her own way. This is a case of remembering neither individually in isolation from others, nor in the company of others with whom one is acquainted but remembering severally.”⁸ The plurality of the memory combines with transcendence to shape collective memory, or cultural memory as Jan Assmann calls it.

⁶ Binns, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

⁷ *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, Trans. Peggy Kamuf, London and New York, Routledge, 1994, p. 115.

⁸ *Getting Back into Place*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1993, p. 23.

The “distance from the everyday” is necessary in order to fix a horizon comprised of “fateful events of the past” that are remembered through what he calls ‘figures of memory’’: texts, rites, monuments, or again practice, etc.⁹ Hence, the stakes of memorializing the war are immense: it is about affecting the “memory of groups of individuals in order to generate particular modes of collective remembering.”¹⁰

To design and build a memorial about the Vietnam War thus means to ensure that the war was “reinjecte” in collective memory. The Vietnam Memorial was originally thought of as a means “to Heal a nation,” as Jan Scruggs’s book title suggests.¹¹ So, the Memorial was to be dedicated to the nation but even more so to the veterans of that war. The soldiers who fought in Vietnam would be part of collective memory, remembered. That was a daunting task, for the Vietnam War was highly divisive and controversial, both “a tragedy and a crime.”¹² It was vocally opposed and was the major cause of protest. It came to be a “dirty War,” in which American soldiers were not acting for the greater good anymore but turned into aggressors. They were denied the status of American heroes they expected upon returning to the USA. The fixated image of the Vietnam veterans as “unassimilated” veterans, lost in alcohol, addiction and violence created a fictionalized veteran as threatening. For instance, released in 1979, *Apocalypse Now* relies around the omnipresent figure of Colonel Kurtz, whose soul has been corrupted by Vietnam, lost between darkness and madness. *The Deer Hunter* (1978) is another example of representation of broken veterans that impacted the public’s vision. As a result, Vietnam veterans have felt isolated and misunderstood. Americans’ perspective has changed overtime though, at least partially, as illustrated by the motto “hate the war, not the soldier.” Jean B. Elshtain and Sheila Tobias argue that “it is difficult to date with any precision when attitudes toward Vietnam veterans began to change for the better.”¹³ By the time the Vietnam War Memorial was dedicated in Washington, D.C., in 1982, the authors claim that the American view of the soldiers who died in Vietnam was closer to that of those of World Wars 1 and 2. Historian Patrick Hagopian¹⁴ evidences that the representation of Vietnam veterans shifted from “baby killers” to “figures in need of healing and deserving of public recognition and

⁹ Jan Assmann, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,” *New German Critique* 65, Cultural History/Cultural Studies (Spring-Summer 1995): 125-33; p. 128-29, in <http://sillagescritiques.revues.org/4861>, retrieved on December 19, 2017.

¹⁰ Ahenk Yilmaz, “Memorialization as the Art of a Method to Analyze Memorials,” *Journal of the Faculty of Architecture*, 2010/1 (27:1) 267-280; p. 267.

¹¹ Jan Scruggs and Joel L. Swerdlow, *To Heal a Nation: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, New York, Harper and Row, 1985.

¹² Arthur Marwick, *The Sixties*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 9.

¹³ *Women, Militarism, and War: Essays in History, Politics, and Social Theory*, Savage, Maryland, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1990; p. 176.

¹⁴ Patrick Hagopian is a senior lecturer in history and American studies at Lancaster University.

acceptance,” which was undeniably the dual purpose of the Memorial.¹⁵ To that regard, it slightly differs from other memorializations: healing involved changing the American perspective on the veterans and the cultural construction of their image that had originated from the political fractures of the 1960’s. The Wall was to bring Americans together, providing “an all-embracing response to a multi-faceted phenomenon” as Hagopian suggests.¹⁶ If Ronald Reagan’s instance on “the noble cause” of Vietnam played out Americans’ minds, the process of memorializing the war surely contributed to that change as well.

As evidence to the partly successful healing character of the Memorial, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is today “one of the most serene spots in the nation’s capital” and has elicited broad acceptance by the American public over the years.¹⁷ A Gallup poll conducted November 13-15, 2000 reported that by November 2000 twenty-six percent of American adults had visited it. To some extent, it would seem that the Memorial “has transcended the specifics of the war it memorialized,” as James Reston Jr. argues.¹⁸

However, it is noteworthy that acceptance has not been primarily guided by the government: the Memorial Wall was not funded by the state, contrary to many war memorials. While it is often acknowledged that “popularly accepted history is only comprised of those traces that have been selected by most historians” as Binns has shown,¹⁹ or again that History is written by the victors, something quite different happened for the national Vietnam Memorial: the project was initiated in April 1979 with the founding of *Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund* by three Vietnam veterans, Jan Scruggs, Bob Doubek, and John P. “Jack” Wheeler III. Reagan cut \$12 million from the Veterans Administration budget in 1980, so the veterans decided to get organized to levy private funds. Also, as Hass points out, the veterans did not trust the “administration to give them the kind of Memorial they hoped for.”²⁰ The project was eventually supported by many, including such organizations as *Veterans of Foreign Wars*. Many small contributions poured in, demonstrating that the process brought Americans together, both civilians and veterans, recreating unity. The funding allowed the emergence of a common memory around the war that was not imposed by the state. Verticality was reversed, an aspect transposed in the designed as this paper will further discuss.

¹⁵ *The Vietnam War in American Memory, Veterans, Memorials, and the Politics of Healing*, Amherst and Boston, University of Massachusetts Press, 2009, p. 20.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 268.

¹⁷ *The Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the History of Washington D.C.’s Vietnam War Monument*, Charles River Editors, 2015.

¹⁸ *A Rift in the Earth*, New York, Arcade Publishing, 2017, p. 2.

¹⁹ Binns, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

²⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 11.

Congress then authorized the nonprofit corporation to “establish a Memorial on public grounds in the West Potomac Park in the District of Columbia, in honor and recognition of the men and women of the Armed Forces of the United States who served in the Vietnam War.”²¹ Congress was thus sanctioning a “proper” commemorative project, one that “honors,” silencing the “healing” aspect. However, the Fund had made it clear that the honoring and the recognition had to deal with individual loss through the listing of all the names of the men and women who died or went MIA in Vietnam. The foot soldiers were to count, more than a political statement about victory. Lin, the winner of the contest, understood that very well and found her inspiration studying World War 1 memorials.

Yet, despite the Fund’s will to unite, the memorialization of the Vietnam War was not to be peaceful and consensual. Indeed, what kind of common memory could be carried out by the Memorial given the bitter divisions? When launching the contest, the Fund stipulated the Memorial would have to be “reflective and contemplative in character,” and a-political. The approach was to be the key to completing the project and ensuring a sense of community. “Depoliticization is what you do to a war you haven’t won. It makes it easier to take,” read an editorial in the *Washington Post* reviewing the end of *The Deer Hunter*.²² It would mean two things: first, it was not to be heroic, hence quite contrary to a traditional war memorial; and second, it did not address the core issue of the war—the ethical question—, nor did it resolve it. So, the process ended up politically polarizing, giving way to a heated debate on the way the Wall interpreted heroism, patriotism and history, and it reignited controversy on the war itself. The brawl around the design revived the competing visions of America that had been so vivid at the time of the war. John Kerry later concluded that “the cultural wars [were] at the heart of the memorial itself.”²³

What is more, the winner of the contest happened to be a 21-year-old female of Asian-Chinese origin. Issues of race resurfaced, along with suspicions of hippies or the élite taking over: Lin was studying at Yale, an Ivy League institution, where everything became politicized in the 1960’s, though Yale students never protested as strongly as universities like Columbia or Harvard. Still, many participated in the 1970 May Day protests on campus to denounce the arrest and trial of Black Panther Bobby Seal and Yalies joined hippies, yippies and Civil Rights demonstrators on the New Haven Green. During the 1960’s, Black Panthers often talked at Yale, the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) had a chapter on campus, students protested the Vietnam War, and even Muhammad Ali spoke about refusing the Vietnam draft in 1969.

²¹ Joint Resolution, 96th Congress, PUBLIC LAW 96-297—JULY 1, 1980.

²² Reston, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

²³ John Kerry’s praise for Reston’s “A Rift in the Earth.”

Lin's educational background thus resonated strongly for some conservatives, who saw her winning the contest as antiwar elite taking control of the memory of a war they protested. What could she have to say about the memory of a war she, for all the reasons mentioned above, could not begin to grasp or have experienced? Experience and authenticity had been fundamental to the testimonies on the Vietnam War. Lin's choice as the designer was bound to be controversial. Despite the unanimous votes, her design was contested and criticized sharply.

One may then wonder whether the original will and purpose of the Fund and the designer's vision were eventually enough to shift the memorialization process of the Vietnam War and distance it from any grand patriotic scheme.

2. Fitting the Memory of Vietnam into the Grand Narrative

Memorials operate as catalysts of individual and collective memory, and the fight over what memory would endure for the Vietnam War crystallized the past oppositions. Binns demonstrates that the visual is sometimes manipulated to make us believe that what we are seeing is not conventional while it actually is. It is the idea that "the conventional is defamiliarized."²⁴ So, could it be that in the end, the Wall is just about "defamiliarization"?

First, we must consider that even though the war was fought on foreign land, Americans have nonetheless focused on its American character. The American War, as the Vietnamese call it, has been about America more than Vietnam: America's credibility, America's foreign policy, American boys, American chemical weapons, America's loss of innocence, etc. The locus for the Memorial evidences that it could not escape "the Americanness of the landscape": it was built at the center of the nation's capital, on the national Mall.²⁵ When apprehending a memorial, one should consider the choice of location, *i.e.* the locus selected for memorialization. The avowed purpose was to find a space, both literally and figuratively, in America and Americans' spirit for the Vietnam War and its veterans. On the day of the inauguration, on November 13, 1982, *The New York Times* accounted that "Thousands of Vietnam veterans marched away from a decade of indifference today and paraded proudly past the White House."²⁶ The Memorial proved cathartic, the veterans had had their welcoming home parade at last, and they were back into the collective memory as an estimated 150,000

²⁴ Binns, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

²⁵ Kowalczyk, *op. cit.*

²⁶ *Op.cit.*

people attended the dedication.²⁷ America, it seemed, had achieved reconciliation, even though the crowd gathered was smaller than expected, “a crowd comparable to that of a pro football game,” complained a spectator.²⁸ Since its dedication, visitations have increased over the years, and it is today the most visited monument in the Washington D.C. In 1998, about one in ten Americans had visited the Wall, Kristin Haas argues²⁹; according to Statista, approximately 5.07 million people visited the Memorial in 2017.³⁰ In *The Vietnam Veterans Memorial, The History of the Washington D.C. 's Vietnam War Monument*, it is argued that “Almost ten percent of the American population have visited [it] in the four and one-half years since it opened,” bearing witness to its almost sacred character in the way a pilgrimage destination would be. Through the Memorial and its presence at the National Mall, it seems America has reclaimed if not the Vietnam War, at least its veterans.

Spatiality is essential in the memorialization process for it contributes to fixing memory. Here, spatiality contributes to linking the monument to the grand narrative of the USA, embodying the resolve to juxtapose the past and the present even more so that the east wall points to Washington Monument while the west points to Lincoln Memorial. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial is thus clearly linked to America’s great past. The strikingly reflective character of the Memorial emphasizes the connection that is sought between the past and the present through the visual link established between Vietnam veterans and America: when one looks at the polished Wall and see the names written on it, one also sees oneself.

The fact that the walls point to these patriotically charged monuments while reflecting the public is no coincidence. It meant America’s acknowledgment of the national significance of the Vietnam War. Lin herself acknowledged that in the end the memorialization of the war in Vietnam did not escape politics, and the control, almost the manipulation, of spatiality demonstrates that.

The political stakes around the memorialization of Vietnam were actually high. In August 1980, a month after Congress authorized the construction of the Memorial, Republican presidential candidate Ronald Reagan gave a speech arguing that Vietnam had been “a noble cause” that “should have been won.”³¹ The nation, he said, had to come to terms with “the Vietnam syndrome.” Reagan’s words referred to chivalry, honor and grandeur, words that had not usually been used regarding the War in Vietnam. The numerous polls testified to the contrary indeed. For instance, between 1975 and 1990, between two-thirds and three quarters

²⁷ Hagopian, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Kristin Ann Hass, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

³⁰ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/254223/number-of-visitors-to-vietnam-veterans-memorial-in-the-us/>; retrieved on March 23, 2018.

³¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 11.

of the Americans polled believed the war was “a mistake,” “wrong,” “wrong and immoral.”³² In 1995, only 33 percent of the population felt it had been “a noble cause.”³³ After having been elected, Reagan gave another speech to attempt to rehabilitate Vietnam, this time stressing the nobility of the veterans, not that of the cause. These speeches attest to the political significance of the reconciliation over Vietnam. In the 1980’s, overall, criticisms of the war were set aside, and “welcoming the veterans” became the focal point. It was important then that the memorialization of the war unified the nation and put an end to the “Vietnam syndrome.” While the Reagan Administration did not want to be openly involved, Hagopian argues that the Memorial was however a crucial issue to them: to further their political agenda in Central America, they needed the division over the war to be overcome, so that the legacies and lessons of the war would not infringe on their political decisions.³⁴

As a result, Lin’s design was somewhat altered, to reach an agreement and to allow the project to be achieved. Memorialization shifted to more traditional considerations. Indeed, detractors, among them the vocal and at times vociferous conservative billionaire H. Ross Perot along with right-wing veterans, criticized the design for not highlighting the heroic sacrifice of the soldiers, in other words for departing from the grand narrative. They compared it to “a black hole of shame.”³⁵ Paradoxically, the critics wanted Vietnam to be memorialized like the previous wars, while it was, in fact, different. Perot, who had been a valuable contributor to the project, was appalled at Lin’s design, dubbing it “a tombstone,” a “trench” or again “an apology.”³⁶ He made it clear, in December 1981, that the Memorial had to be rethought and “make an affirmative statement of America’s honor.”³⁷ His understanding of what a war memorial should be was strongly related to the writing of a grand narrative in which America had to remember the nobility of war, and the grandeur of its mission. His attacks aligned with the right-wing veterans, who agreed the design was “a black gash of shame” which was neither celebratory, nor heroic nor manly.³⁸ The attacks did not end until a “compromise” was reached, by means of a few modifications that toned down the initial purposes of the Memorial. In short, the original design and intentions were betrayed to comply with what Hagopian describes as “a group of self-appointed custodians of public memory” that wanted to revive the grand

³² *Ibid.*, p. 13.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

³⁴ For instance, they promised the American public that US intervention in Central America would not be “another Vietnam.”

³⁵ Frederick Daly, a Vietnam veteran, described the project as such in a letter addressed to Michael Deaver in 1981, in Hagopian, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

³⁷ Hagopian, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

³⁸ Haas, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

narrative.³⁹ Among the alterations, the addition of an inscription was highly debated. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund resolved to add inscriptions, after many controversies. The “epilogue was to read: “Our nation remembers the courage, the sacrifice, and the devotion to duty and country of its veterans”. “Remembers” was replaced by “honors” afterwards.⁴⁰ That inscription is engraved at the bottom of the Wall while another at the top and the bottom of the Wall reads:

(Top of The Wall) IN HONOR 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 OF THOSE WHO REMAIN MISSING ARE INSCRIBED IN THE ORDER THEY WERE TAKEN FROM US.

Eventually, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial was dedicated on November 13, 1982 at the National Mall in Washington, D.C. Yet again, Frederick Hart’s *The Three Servicemen*, was added in 1984, displaying far more traditional aesthetics and bringing in patriotism: the bronze sculpture represents three soldiers, one White, one Black and one soldier with Hispanicized features. A flag was added to the sculpture as well as an inscription at the base of the staff that reads: “This Flag represents the service rendered to our country by the veterans of the Vietnam War. The Flag affirms the principle of freedom for which they fought and their pride in having served under difficult circumstances”. This engraving echoed Private Jeremiah Denton’s words in a speech he gave after stepping out of the plane upon his release on February 13, 1972: “We are honored to have had the opportunity to serve our country under difficult circumstances. God Bless America.”⁴¹ The plaque thus clearly signaled that patriotic interests had taken over, which led Haas to describe the addition as supplanting the Wall by a more heroic, representational figural memorial.⁴² What is more, while Lin had received \$20,000 as the winner of the contest, Hart was paid \$330,000 for his statue: patriotism was worth paying a higher price to overcome élitism, an argument that had been raised by the detractors. In short, John Wayne was worth more than Jane Fonda—an image of the two actors and what they stood for used by an art critic oversimplifying the antagonism between the wall and the statue.⁴³

All in all, the Memorial could be read as participating of the grand narrative: the Vietnam War and its soldiers are finally inscribed at the National Mall into the national myth

³⁹ Hagopian, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

⁴¹ James P. Sterba, “First Prisoner Release Completed,” *The New York Times*, February 13, 1972. Available at <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/learning/general/onthisday/big/0212.html>

⁴² Haas, *op. cit.*, p. 15-18.

⁴³ Hagopian, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

that builds on the necessity of combat. The conventional perception of what a war memorial should be—heroic, supportive of nationalistic stakes and the necessity of the fight hence the sacrifice—altered the original project. Arguably, the motifs and themes of the grand narrative of war are revised in the Vietnam War Memorial through the locus and addition, operating some form of defamiliarization.

All the while, the Wall clearly departs from the codes of war memorials and the project was harshly criticized for it, just as some Americans in the Sixties were claiming other codes, drawing on the Beat Generation, the Civil Rights and a strong criticism of capitalism. The cultural phenomenon left a substantial imprint on society. Given that the Memorial Wall is aesthetically isolated from other war memorials, it is legitimate to wonder whether it could be understood or interpreted as partaking of some sort of countercultural legacy.

3. A Countercultural Memorial?

The term counterculture has been vastly applied, based on its broad meaning of expressing disagreement, disobedience or even rebellion. It is deeply linked with the period commonly known as the Sixties, when, according to many historians such as Arthur Marwick “what happened during this period transformed social and cultural developments for the rest of the century.”⁴⁴ He argues that the Sixties were indeed “a mini-renaissance... a time of changing perception and objectives.”⁴⁵

During the Sixties, the younger generation came to reject the values and conventions carried out by what Theodore Roszak in *The Making of a Counter-Culture* (1969) called “the technocracy,” the American Establishment, the capitalist system and the consumerist society. The young, but also, the hippies, the yippies, the feminists, the supporters of Black Power, and so many others, believed that by protesting or “simply doing their own things” as Marwick suggests, they would bring about change and destroy the bourgeois society and culture they were condemning.⁴⁶ Distrust in the government emerged along with an idealized notion of freedom. They—mostly young people—claimed the right to an alternative culture,⁴⁷ meaning not only art and popular culture but also “the network or totality of attitudes, values and

⁴⁴ Marwick, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁴⁷ See Frédéric Robert and Armand Hage, *Révoltes et Utopies : la contre-culture américaine des années 1960*, Rennes, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2011.

practices,” as Marwick has shown.⁴⁸ In the same way, Kowalczyk contends music, drugs and literature seemed to define the group, while in reality these were only superficial features, hiding a much more complex and polymorphous system. While Marwick evidences that the possibility of a “counterculture” independent of, alternative to, or truly replacing the mainstream—or bourgeois—culture was unlikely, it was nonetheless a visible and vocal cultural and social phenomenon. Contrary to popular belief, many different people from different backgrounds were part of it, as Peter Clecak argues.⁴⁹ In short, the phenomenon was quite heterogeneous, diverse in nature, not unified and *flexible*. These characteristics are actually what allowed it to permeate and transform society, and to operate a cultural revolution, as demonstrated by Marwick. Its legacy was enduring in many ways, to the extent that it was evoked during the debates about the design of the Memorial.

When the design for the Memorial was disclosed, critics pointed out its “non-war memorial-like” nature denouncing its unpatriotic aspect. The cultural war had clearly reemerged. Arguable, the Memorial Wall is a peculiar site of recollection in many ways, diverging from conventional characteristics of war memorials. While it was essential to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund to erect a memorial that would be a nonpolitical statement, the Wall quickly became one as it softly reversed most of the paradigms, a paradox Lin herself had come to realize.

First, if we look into the major aspect of war Memorials, *i.e.* to reformulate a current moment “into a nostalgic depiction of the past,” it does not apply here.⁵⁰ Clearly, the *abstraction* of the design raises the issue of possible ambivalences toward the war, leading to an equivocal interpretation, there may be some hesitation about the exact meaning of what is represented as Yilmaz suggests.⁵¹ It is not the representation of a physical entity of a person, nor a physical remnant of the war. The Wall, at least at the time it was designed, did not clearly identify a direct relation between the event and the object, underlying the idea that the visitor may contemplate the Memorial “through diverse ways of different personal memories.”⁵² James Edward Young argues that “in its hermetic and personal vision, abstraction encourages private visions in viewers, which would defeat the communal and collective aims of public memorials.”⁵³ As a result, the Wall fosters alternatives and far more personal interpretations of the war that stand against the imposition of a grand narrative onto the citizens.

⁴⁸ Marwick, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

⁴⁹ *America's Quest for the Ideal Self: Dissent and Fulfilment in the 60s and 70s*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1983, p. 18.

⁵⁰ Binns, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

⁵¹ Yilmaz, *op. cit.*, p. 273.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 274.

⁵³ Young, “The Biography of a Memorial Icon,” (1989, 101), in Yilmaz, *ibid.*, p. 274.

Most notably, any grand narrative commonly summons images of heroism, or masculinity, or vertical dominance that are more often than not the characteristics of war memorials. The design of the Wall offers a divergence, a “significant deviation,”⁵⁴ from the grand narrative *i.e.* “the epic, nationalistic, wider perspective.”⁵⁵ And this is all true to the primary intent: the veterans did not want to express any kind of victorious or glorious moment. The unpatriotic feeling about it is indeed quite palpable. This absence of heroism was actually used as an argument from detractors, as previously explained. Some saw the design as a statement against the war: “Political commentator Patrick J. Buchanan and Illinois Republican Representative Henry Hyde led the fight, circulating letters alleging that one of the jurors on the selection committee was a communist and that four had been active anti-war protesters.”⁵⁶ As a matter of fact, the detractors claimed, its V-shape is a reminder of the war-era peace symbol.⁵⁷ They omitted the fact that the angle of the Wall was far too wide to truly mean that. Phillis Schlafly, a well-known anti-feminist activist, described it as a “Tribute to Jane Fonda,” a strong criticism that went straight to the heart of many Americans that remembered Jane Fonda’s photograph next to a North Vietnamese antiaircraft gun.⁵⁸ It had unleashed the wrath of a large part of the population and bestowed on her the nickname of Hanoi Jane. The color of the Memorial was also understood as “the universal color of shame and dishonor” by the critics.⁵⁹ The absence of patriotic claims became the reason for demanding the addition of a flag to the Memorial. “The Flag is what we fought for, isn’t it?”, said Donald Sherman, a paralyzed veteran, while attending the inauguration.⁶⁰ Lin’s response was unequivocal: “That’s like putting a mustache on the Mona Lisa.”⁶¹ The flag would be added to Hart’s statue, not the Wall.

The disparaged absence of patriotism echoes another striking absent feature, “masculinity.”⁶² For many generations of Americans, to become a soldier, to fight for one’s nation, is not only a great honor, it also makes a man out of you. American memorial art usually tries to avoid the dead, they herald the parades, “the exalted,” said Lin, not the pain. The War Memorials prior to the Vietnam War highlighted the grandeur and nobility of the cause much as the sacrifice of the soldiers-heroes. But the Sixties and counterculture reversed the paradigm:

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Binns, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

⁵⁶ PBS, Review of *Maya Lin: A Strong Clear Vision*, a documentary by Freida Lee Mock, 1994; available at http://www.pbs.org/pov/mayalin/film_description.php. Retrieved on March, 15, 2017.

⁵⁷ Statement by Duncan Hunter, a Vietnam veteran, in Hagopian, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

⁵⁸ *Moral Majority Weekly*, in Hass, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

⁵⁹ The claim was abandoned when an African American officer, Brigadier General George Price, stood up against the pejorative references to the color. See Hagopian, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

⁶⁰ *The Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, *op. cit.*

⁶¹ Mock, *op. cit.*

⁶² “The design was criticized for not being “masculine” enough,” in Hass, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

peace became patriotic, while Vietnam veterans were ignored at best, or scorned. The Memorial for the Vietnam veterans could therefore not resemble any other, it could not praise the masculine war hero. On the contrary, its blackness and opacity evidence of a painful moment, a focus on the lives lost that is the price of all wars. The representative “Wall,” in other words the object chosen to memorialize the war, echoes what a wall means and meant: those faced during the war, impassable and insuperable. These were ideas that Lin had in mind when she participated to the contest; she had developed an approach on war that she saw as “a very futile and frustrating experience.”⁶³ The Wall stems from the grassy ground to only go back to it at its other end; in other words, it fades into the D.C. ground. The horizontal orientation of the Memorial is quite unusual: it is not visible until approaching, and it fades into the earth rather than rising vertically. The inscription of the names in a chronological order also partakes of that horizontality. The spatial and time horizontality clearly contrasts with previous war memorials: instead of elevating the memory of the war, the Memorial questions the notions of pride or heroism; it is “a journey to an awareness of immeasurable loss” as Lin herself described it.⁶⁴ It crystallizes the anguish the war in the way the Wall “cuts open the earth,” an impulse Lin had when she visited the site. She explained it would be like “an initial violence that in time would heal. The grass would grow back, but the cut would remain,” emphasizing the moral ambiguity of the war and the scar the war left on the nation’s psyche, a wound.⁶⁵ This approach came to be very contrary to what war memorials usually conveys—victory or leaders’ accomplishments. Through her design, its blackness, its reflective surface, the descent into the ground and the names in chronological order by date of casualty, emotions and personal experience take over the nationalistic aim and recalls the emphasis put on personal experience in the counterculture.

The spatiality of the Memorial reinforces that point. Research has evidenced that if the locus offers “a spatial experience to the visitor,” it becomes more effective.⁶⁶ The Vietnam Veterans Memorial is a case in point. Indeed, war memorials are traditionally places of contemplation, where one silently and dutifully pays one’s respect. And Lin believed that the visitors’ experience would be mostly contemplative. However, soon, and unlike many war memorials built before, the Wall became not only a place of memory and contemplation but also an “interface between the sunny world and the quiet, darker world beyond that we can’t enter.”⁶⁷ The passage is made possible as a result of the various characteristics of the design,

⁶³ Maya Lin, “Making the Memorial,” *The New York Times*, November 2, 2000, available at: <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2000/11/02/making-the-memorial/>

Lin, “Making the Memorial,” *The New York Times*, November 2, 2000.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Yilmaz, *op. cit.*, p. 276.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

first and foremost its descent into the ground that provides a spatial experience where the visitor is on the move, willing to go down into memory lane. Its blackness and the names of the dead also gradually immerse the visitor as one travels along the Wall. The physical features create an intimacy that overwhelms the visitor and allows the Memorial to become a locus of communication between two worlds, between the specter and the living. As a result, the Wall is an emotional experience as much as a physical one.

Both the abstraction of the design and the physicality of the Memorial have led the visitors to compensate materially for the absence of clear and directive messages. Not only do they process through the Memorial, but they also touch, rub, feel the engraved names—the power of the names touched creates a dynamic process of remembering. The Memorial has become a place to communicate with the dead, in a mystical, personal and physical way. The experience of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial takes the passive act of remembering one step further. In addition, the visitors of the Vietnam Memorial themselves took matter further into their own hands and soon turned the Memorial into an interactive place: they leave artefacts, offerings really, in order to create concrete memories, to conjure up the individuals and their stories behind the carved names, and to bear witness to an emotional connection. This is rather an unusual phenomenon, that has made the place a locus of secular ritual.

All kinds of memorabilia are left, from letters to photos, flags, flowers, beads, and medals or combat boots, but also quite unexpected objects such as the wedding ring of a Viet Cong fighter. Almost a decade after the dedication, the children of the men who died in Vietnam started leaving more and more letters. President Reagan also left a note on Veterans Day in 1988. As a matter of fact, the first offering occurred before the Memorial was completed: a Navy pilot who had lost his brother during the war asked that this brother's Purple Heart be put in the foundations, which was agreed. Some left darker imprints at the Wall however, for some veterans also committed suicide there. "I wanted to die with my men," said Randolph Taylor, who survived. The notion of the Wall as "a special place for communion between the dead and the living" was indeed understood in a multiplication of ways, as Hagopian argues.⁶⁸

By means of offerings, the public superimposes their variety of emotional responses to the original design and intent. Instead of being imposed a memory from the top down, the public has transformed the object of memorialization. Hence, if any memorial, it ceased to be the "property" of the designer and became public possession. As Hagopian puts it, there is a twist: the public has turned it into a multi-centric personal memory that supersedes traditional nationalistic purposes.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 366.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 348.

America lost the Vietnam War, but “was not a defeated nation,” David L. Anderson argues.⁷⁰ Indeed, its power on the international scene, or again its economic power remained quite intact. But Vietnam did signal the end of the notion of America’s invincibility, that “there were limits to its power,” and that it was not necessarily fighting for the greater good.⁷¹ So, does the Memorial designed for this war, the Wall, provide only a simple variation of memorialization working on defamiliarization or does it offer a true alternative, a counter-representation to the grand narrative?

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial does inform visitors of the history and that something different happened. This response is elicited by the fact that, like most memorials for the Vietnam War or the Vietnam veterans, it offers no noble or muscular representation, while the unconventional use of spatiality emphasizes loss and the dead. Loss stands out as the primary emotion of visitors when facing the Memorial over patriotism and grandeur, somehow bringing it closer to a civilian memorial such as the 9/11 Memorial in New York City.

The Wall in Washington D.C. also aimed mostly at a different type of healing, but to the detriment of dissent that was almost silenced. Most notably, if right-wing detractors were vocal and imposed additions, the antiwar movement did not manifest itself at all, and moral considerations were not addressed. To some extent, the insistence on healing, or seeking redemption, may have allowed to transform the memory of the war to fit it in the grand narrative, “a kind of national mythology devoid of truth,” as poet W. D. Ehrhart contends, a historical denial that recalls a typical “American remembrance of the war.”⁷² It echoes what one of George W. Bush’s aides said about Iraq: “We are an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality.”⁷³ Hence, the Wall has allowed the war in Vietnam to enter the memory of the nation and to be absorbed by American collective memory.

On the other hand, the questions raised by the war cannot be answered fully as long as the elements of response remain narcissistic.⁷⁴ The America-centered memory will only be partial and will not assess the complex reality of the war. The two additions, Hart’s statue and Glenna Goodacre’s *Vietnam Veterans Women’s Memorial*, only begin to demonstrate the difficulty to design one national memory of the war.⁷⁵ The paradigm of heroism has proven problematic, as much as the absence of any moral debate.

⁷⁰ *The Columbia Guide to the Vietnam War*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2002, p. 84.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Hagopian, *op. cit.*, p. 404.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 430.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 402.

⁷⁵ Goodacre’s *Vietnam Veterans Women’s Memorial* is a statue of three women caring for a fallen soldier surrounded by eight trees, standing for the eight women who died in Vietnam. It was dedicated in November 1993.

Interestingly however, despite the conventional additions to the Memorial Wall, the main attraction remains the Wall, which is the most visited memorial in Washington D.C. Therefore, as Marwick argues that there cannot be any counterculture outside the mainstream culture, but rather an alteration, a revision, similarly the Wall is not totally estranged from the mainstream culture of war memorials, but still offers an altered vision. In the same way that culture provided alternatives to the mainstream culture through what has been called “counterculture,” the Memorial Wall thus may stand as a “counter war memorial.” The fact that the Second World War Memorial, the last national war memorial to have been inaugurated at the National Mall (2004) attests to the will to embody the grand narrative again singles out the Vietnam Veterans Memorial even more as a legacy of the 1960’s and the countercultural claims: with the Second World War Memorial, the national interest is put forward, the recollection and memorialization reclaim the national mythology, the telling of the familiar story and iterative memory of American exceptionalism that is nowhere apparent in the Vietnam Memorial. On the very contrary, the Wall and its history stands as evidence of unresolved antagonism over the vivid memory of the Vietnam War, its legacy and the protests fueled by a vocal counterculture that refuted the belief in America’s “exceptional innocence”⁷⁶

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