

Captivity Narrative in Vietnam War Literature Reconsidered: Reading Tim O'Brien's "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" and Daniel Cano's "Somewhere Outside Duc Pho"

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Introduction

The aim of this essay is to re-examine the significance of the "captivity narrative" in the representation of the Vietnam War. "Captivity" is the opposite concept of "freedom," and the image of the American captivity is crucial in thinking about American's anxiety about their manhood after the Vietnam War. This paper focuses on two short stories about the Vietnam War: Tim O'Brien's "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" (1990) and Daniel Cano's "Somewhere Outside Duc Pho" (1995). These two stories have a similar structure: in both stories one person mysteriously disappears from the U.S. military in the middle of the war, and the narrator focuses on the soldiers left behind her/him. The narrators in both stories are less interested in specifying the reason why one disappears; rather, they depict how her/his disappearance affects other soldiers and how these soldiers repeatedly tell the story of her/his disappearance. Also, both stories are a part of the novel-in-stories, *The Things They Carried* and *Shifting Loyalties*. The former is recognized as a canonical literature of the Vietnam War, while the latter is known to very few. This paper does not aim to put one work above the other; rather, it will explore the significant difference in treatment of disappearances across these structurally similar stories. In "Sweetheart" it is a white civilian woman that disappears, and in "Duc Pho" it is a Mexican American soldier. Racial and gender difference are crucial for understanding the significance of these two stories; thus, U.S. domestic issues of the 1960s, namely the rise of feminism and Civil Rights movement, should also be considered.

The frameworks of the family and the nation state are crucial in analyzing the historical and cultural significance of captivity. The existence of captivity and/or missing person shows the vulnerability of the family and the nation state. The captivity narrative has historically served as cultural justification for white Americans' conquest of Native Americans in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. There are different types of captivity narratives,

but the most popular one has been what historian June Naimas calls “the Frail Flowers,” in which a white woman is forcibly taken by “savage” Native Americans. These stories intricately evoked the anxiety of white Americans because “[captive] stories of women and children pointed out the vulnerability of the family and social fabric on the frontier” (82). In these stories white women’s domestic purity was contrasted with Native Americans’ “wild” and “savage” character. It was white Americans who invaded into Native Americans’ territory; but these mythical narratives instead showed that the white American family was under the attack of “uncivilized” Native Americans.

In this paper I argue that “Sweetheart” and “Duc Pho” can be read as the rewriting or the parody of the captivity narrative. These two stories are different from the conventional captivity narrative in three points. Firstly, in these stories the missing person never returns. In other words, the soldiers left behind cannot save her/him. Secondly, in these stories one’s disappearance is told through clearly apocryphal stories while the conventional captivity narrative highlights its verisimilitude. “Sweetheart” is based on the soldiers’ second-hand narrative, while “Duc Pho” underlines its quality as first-hand experience.¹ Finally, in these stories the person’s autonomous choice of leaving the U.S. military is implied while the conventional captivity narrative depicts how one is forcibly taken by his or her enemy. All in all, these differences deconstruct the power hierarchy inherent in the conventional captivity narrative.

In the light of these differences, the term “AWOL” (Absence Without Leave) is apparently more suitable for the character’s mysterious disappearance in these two stories rather than “POW” and “MIA,” (Prisoner Of War and Missing In Action) which designate the characters’ status in the conventional captivity narrative. Nonetheless, I argue that these two stories should be understood in their proximity with the captivity narrative for two reasons. Firstly, the distinction between “POW/MIA” and “AWOL” is arbitrary. Historian Natasha Zaretsky points out that the list of the captured prisoners was not released by North Vietnamese because North Vietnam understood that the United States technically did not declare a war against North Vietnam (25). Under this condition it was impossible to distinguish “POW,” “MIA,” and “AWOL” because there were no information to categorize the missing people as such unless specific evidence was given by the witness.² At least in these two stories it is impossible to decide whether she/he was “POW/MIA” or “AWOL.”

More importantly, the “captivity narrative” has played crucial parts in the history and culture of the Vietnam War. Vietnam was colloquially known as “Indian country.”³ Vietnam as “Indian country” is a fictional image created by white Americans because of the “similarity”

of the Vietnamese and the Native American's racially marginalized position. Jen Dunnaway argues: "the Native American is conflated with the Vietnamese in ways that mark both as enemy while simultaneously coloring America's campaign in Southeast Asia with shades of imperialism and genocides" (116). In spite of a lot of significant historical differences, the Native American is culturally identified with the Vietnamese because they are the common "enemy" to U.S. imperialism. Frequently represented as the "last frontier," then, it is no wonder that white Americans have reproduced the national myth of the captivity narrative through their experience in the Vietnam War. Historically, a national campaign of returning the POW/MIA to America occurred during the 1960s and 1970s.⁴ The "family" of the missing people was foregrounded in this campaign, and the image of the POW/MIA was used as a symbol of the American family/nation state under siege. As Zaretsky puts it, "POW families seemed to confirm what many feared—that a failure of national leadership had dire implications for leadership within the family, and vice versa" (29). The image of captured white men evoked national anxiety about the loss of white American manhood: the Vietnam War makes America a fatherless society both in its private and public sphere. In spite of the relatively smaller number of POW/MIA soldiers in the Vietnam War, the image of the white men's captivity was nationally shared in the late 1960s and 1970s because it was the first "lost war" for the United States.⁵

Furthermore, this anxiety created the cultural fantasy of the white soldiers and civilians' rescuing the captured men in popular films like *First Blood* and *Missing in Action*. Marita Sturken argues: "The MIA revenge films . . . were more blatant rewritings of history, with Americans refighting the war and rescuing the MIAs, thereby redeeming the forgotten veterans" (89). These films are "mythical" rewriting of the Vietnam War history: they helped white men to recharge their "lost" manhood and freedom by reenacting the archetypal frontier myth of the captivity narrative.⁶ It is necessary to note here that in the captivity narrative of the Vietnam War white men are captured, not white women. Thus, the captivity narrative of the Vietnam War is much closer to, say, John Smith and Daniel Boone's captivity narrative.⁷ However, the basic gender power structure behind white men's captivity narrative is not very different from that of white women. According to Naimas, white men's captivity narrative demonstrates "a father's power as savior and preserver of the frontier family and the basic insecurity of the family without the white male protector" (66). The narratives of both white men and women in captivity highlight the vulnerability of the white American family and the nation state. The conventional captivity narrative in the Vietnam War films/novels typically represents the once captured white male protagonist heroically breaking a siege and

preventing the collapse of American family/nation state. White fathers regain their power in the “last frontier”: to put it differently, this fantasy mirrors the white patriarchy’s anxiety about the loss of their power.

Written around 1990, “Sweetheart” and “Duc Pho” criticize such a myth about white men. By representing a story about missing Americans and illustrating the apocryphal quality of the story, O’Brien and Cano clarify how the frontier myth is reproduced by white men in the age of the Vietnam syndrome. In “Sweetheart,” an innocent American girl gradually “goes native” after she arrives in Vietnam. She turns into an “outsider” of the American family and America as a nation state: she criticizes American domesticity. However, by telling the apocryphal story about the “outsider,” white soldiers reinforce their homosocial bonds. As a Vietnam veteran, O’Brien self-critically depicts the process in which white men create a fantasy about their own masculinity. Similarly, in “Duc Pho,” a Mexican American soldier is rumored to run from his battery and join the Viet Cong. On the one hand, Cano depicts how white soldiers misunderstand his mysterious disappearance as the Third World consolidation; on the other, the significance of his disappearance remains ambivalent to Mexican American soldiers. His mysterious disappearance elucidates the fluctuating significance of machismo in the age of the Chicano moratorium movement.

1. Tim O’Brien’s “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong”

In Tim O’Brien’s “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong,” a white girl Mary Anne disappears into the Vietnamese wilderness. Mary Anne is the girlfriend of an infantryman Mark Fossie, who makes her join him in a small medical company near the Song Tra Bong in Quang Ngai Province, Vietnam. This company’s camp is isolated by “tangled rolls of concertina wire” from the “thick walls of wilderness” (91). Mary Anne is described as a stereotypical seventeen-year-old blond all-American girl, wearing sexy pink sweater and white culottes. At first, she innocently enjoys her new experience in Vietnam, but gradually undergoes a “metamorphosis from all-American girl to predatory Amazonian” (Jarvis 138). Mary Anne stops using makeup, cuts her hair, and her body becomes “foreign” (99). One day she leaves Fossie without any explanation, and joins the mysterious Green Berets to participate in a riskier ambush. Mary Anne gradually becomes uncontrollable, and even the Greenies cannot stop her from doing more dangerous things even they would balk at. Eventually she “[crosses] to the other side” (116): she goes barefoot, stops carrying a weapon

and disappears into the Vietnamese jungle.⁸

This story should be understood as a rewriting of two different types of the conventional captivity narrative: “the American Amazon” and “the Frail Flower.” At first glance, Mary Anne’s hypermasculinity seems to be closer to the image of the “American Amazon.” Naimas examines mythical stories of the American Amazon (e.g. the narrative of Mary Rowlandson) fighting against Native Americans. She argues: “The pairing of the fighting woman with the domestic one was a good propaganda device for urging traditional women to take up arms, as if the use of violence would complement rather than compromise femininity and domesticity” (35). Seen in this light, “Sweetheart” has two significant differences from the “frontier mother” myth. To begin with, it is very doubtful that Mary Anne fights for her country. Mary Anne is more egoistically interested in herself and the Vietnamese land. Then, more importantly, the “American Amazon” eventually returns to her home when she defeats her enemy, but Mary Anne never returns to her domestic life. Originally, Mary Anne embodies white Americans’ dreamlike domesticity. As the narrator puts it, “Mary Anne Bell and Mark Fossie had been sweethearts since grammar school. From the sixth grade on they had known for a fact that someday they would be married, and live in a fine gingerbread house near Lake Erie, and have three healthy yellow-haired children, and grow old together, and no doubt die in each other’s arms and be buried in the same walnut casket” (94). Mary Anne’s identity as a future mother is illustrated here. This description seems to be almost impersonal, but that is the point: Mary Anne is a “symbol” of American domesticity for which white soldiers sacrifice their lives. However, Mary Anne’s American dream gradually collapses as she falls under the spell of the Vietnamese jungle: “not necessarily three kids . . . [not] necessarily a house on Lake Erie” (99). While the Amazonian captivity narrative would demonstrate her temporal participation in the combat and eventual return to her home, Mary Anne is gone for good. In short, “Sweetheart” is a story about the missing white (read: American) mother. Mary Anne is seduced by the symbolic Vietnamese land, not a flesh-and-blood person; Mary Anne’s autonomous “marriage” with the Vietnamese land illustrates the story’s mythical quality.

It is significant to remember that the captivity narrative is about not only white women’s vulnerability but white men’s heroism. Compared with the “Frail Flower” captivity narrative, the transformation of the white men in “Sweetheart” stands out: Mark Fossie and other white soldiers cannot save Mary Anne from “going native.” Lorrie N. Smith illustrates the contrast between Fossie and Mary Anne: “Mark becomes emasculated in inverse proportion to Mary Anne’s increasing autonomy, as if her transformation deprives him of his

own traditional eighteen-year-old initiation into manhood" (34). "Sweetheart" can be thus read as a story about a potential white father's failure to protect his family and the nation state in the contact zone. The white mother is missing, and the white father is emasculated: O'Brien's rewriting of the captivity narrative implies transformation of American domesticity.

Certainly, the American domesticity was facing a significant turning point in the late 1960s.⁹ However, O'Brien's story does not simply mirror this historical condition. That is, Mary Anne's disappearance in "Sweetheart" should be understood as a collective cultural fantasy created by white men. Thus, white male soldiers' storytelling should be carefully examined because it shows the process of their fantasy making. In "Sweetheart," Mary Anne's disappearance is mostly told by Rat Kiley, who is notorious for "exaggeration and overstatement" (89). At the beginning of the story the narrator Tim O'Brien adds the proviso that "it was normal procedure to discount sixty or seventy percent of anything [Kiley] had to say" (89): the readers are urged to question the accuracy of the story. Moreover, Kiley actually does not witness the last part of the story in which Mary Anne leaves the Green Berets and completely disappears into the Vietnamese wilderness. Accordingly, this story's narrative method is largely different from the convention of the captivity narrative. While the captivity narrative highlights its verisimilitude as a first-hand experience, the narrator of "Sweetheart" encourages us to read it as a collective fantasy of the white male soldiers rather than a story based on realism.

In other words, the form of metafiction is crucial in this story. Metafiction can be succinctly defined as fiction about fiction.¹⁰ In his excellent article, Michael Tavel Clarke examines the significance of metafiction in *Things*:

The danger of metafiction is solipsism. On the formal level, it is a self-reflexive practice in which writing draws attention to its own status as writing, its own constructedness. At its extreme, it denies the very existence of a reality outside language. The form is often mirrored by subject matter that delves into private experience in a comparably self-absorbed way, minimizing or ignoring (at its extreme, perhaps, denying) the experience and suffering of others. The advantage of such solipsism is the challenge to omniscience and objectivity, the challenge to the imperial belief that the self can know, represent, and occupy all perspectives. (137-138)

Metafiction denies the character's omnipotent viewpoint; rather, it shows the limitation of one's perspective. In other words, metafiction denies "natural" representation; it emphasizes "its own constructedness." The narrator's excessive reference to storytelling in "Sweetheart"

highlights the fictionality of Mary Anne's story. In his article Clarke examines O'Brien's metafictional representation of the Vietnamese and the Native American in *Things*. He clarifies the way O'Brien, as the narrator, eventually obliterates the agency of these racial minorities and reproduces stereotypical racial images. Clarke argues: "O'Brien's tactic in the face of this conundrum—whether to include representations of Vietnamese and risk stereotyping them or exclude majority of people involved in the war—is to include Vietnamese characters but make it clear that they are products of his American characters' imaginations and, indirectly, his own" (135). I would argue that the same thing can be said about his representation of American women in "Sweetheart." In "Sweetheart," white soldiers create "solipsistic" fantasy about an all-American blond girl's transformation into an Amazonian, to borrow Clarke's term. Indeed, Mary Anne is not a flesh-and-blood character. She moves between the extremes of all-American innocent girl and hyper-masculine Amazonian. Her character is inconsistent even after she transforms into an Amazonian figure because her violence toward the Vietnamese and pacifism are implied at the same time. On the one hand, she wears a necklace of human (most probably the Vietnamese) tongues (110); on the other, she stops carrying a weapon and join the Vietnamese (115).¹¹ In short, Mary Anne is "androgynous" (Vernon 250): she is a mythical character whose gender roles cannot be understood in the conventional terms.

White soldiers' fantasies of Mary Anne's disappearance show their anxiety toward the collapse of the traditional norms of American domesticity. They are anxious about white mothers' leaving their family and fathers' powerlessness against their wives. Unlike in the conventional captivity narrative, white men cannot maintain the boundaries in "Sweetheart": "narrative boundaries, gender boundaries, racial and national boundaries, as well as ethical boundaries" (Farrell 17). Mary Anne transgresses these boundaries and white soldiers cannot do anything about it. I argue that white soldiers' anxiety should be seen in the light of the historical transformation happening inside the United States at that time: the rise of second-wave feminism, which encouraged white middle-class women to leave their homes. "Sweetheart" should be read as a story in which a white militant woman "awakens" in the middle of the 1960s and leaves her home. In other words, Mary Anne radically overturns the "feminine mystique." It is crucial here that "containment" of women in the domestic sphere was linked with "containment" of communism in the Cold War America. In *Homeward Bound*, Elaine Tyler May discusses the tension between U.S. domestic and foreign issues in the age of the Cold War. She writes:

Although strategists and foreign policy experts feared that the Soviet Union might gain the military might and territorial expansion to achieve the world domination, many leaders, pundits, and observers worried that the real dangers to America were internal ones: racial strife, emancipated women, class conflict, and familial disruption. To alleviate these fears, Americans turned to the family as a bastion of safety in an insecure world Like their leaders, most Americans agreed that family stability appeared to be the best bulwark against the dangers of the cold war. (9)

May points out that “family stability” was not a reality but a social fantasy created by American ideology that identified the middle-class nuclear family way of life with its own democratic political order. What is represented in O’Brien’s story is an inversion of this illusion of “family stability.” In other words, Mary Anne’s disappearance symbolically shows the failures of American containment policy. Mary Anne conflates the home front with the battle front, and her conflation destroys the illusion of the white male soldiers that they are fighting to keep their home intact. Mary Anne’s cultural miscegenation was what the white soldiers were worried about most in the turmoil of the 1960s.^{1 2}

In this context, the white soldiers’ fantasy in “Sweetheart” and the conventional captivity narrative evoke the same kinds of anxiety in spite of their apparent differences: they both stem from white men’s anxiety about containing white women in their family. Furthermore, by delineating the borderline between the private sphere and the public sphere, white soldiers secure the public space for their own. Smith argues: “inscrutable evil and cultural otherness are collapsed into the figure of a woman. The story is less concerned with what motivates [Mary Anne], however, than with defending men’s homosocial bonds against all threat of feminine invasion” (32).^{1 3} White soldiers’ homosocial bonds are created by imagining a monstrous, hypermasculine woman who cannot be contained in their community. Indeed, not only Mary Anne but Fossie, who creates the cause of the confusion between home front and battle front, disappears from the text at the end. He is “busted to PFC, shipped back to a hospital in the States, and two months later received a medical discharge” (115). Mary Anne’s disappearance does not transform anything; white soldiers’ homosocial bonds are strengthened again by punishing a person who disarrays bonds between men. Then, Alex Vernon’s argument that O’Brien “[deconstructs] conventional gender dynamics” (252) is less persuasive: rather, I argue that the white soldiers’ reproduction of the frontier myth reinforces conventional gender dynamics, even if this reinforcement of gender hierarchy is eventually criticized by the structure of the metafiction.^{1 4} In spite of Kiley’s insistence that his fellow

soldier should “get rid of that sexist attitude,” his own sexist attitude is clear in the text. He sums up the story, “[the] girl joined the zoo. One more animal—end of story” (107). Also, in “How to Tell a True War Story,” Kiley calls a dead fellow soldier’s sister the “dumb cooze” because she does not write back to him (69). Kiley’s misogynic attitude forces the reader to carefully think about the reliability of his story. Mary Anne could have been a subversive figure if she were realistically imagined from a more objective viewpoint. However, O’Brien does not choose to do so; rather, he foregrounds the white soldiers’ fantastic imagination which creates unrealistic disappearance of Mary Anne according to their own anxiety. By so doing, O’Brien eventually criticizes the character O’Brien as a white American writer who once engaged in the war; also, the resurgence of the captivity narrative in his contemporary representation about the Vietnam War is criticized in “Sweetheart.” O’Brien self-critically reveals that white men’s freedom is reproduced by one’s imagination.

Finally, it is noteworthy that O’Brien rewrites another national frontier myth in *Things*: the Lone Ranger stories. In *Things*, the author foregrounds the friendly, one-to-one relationship between a white American (including the character O’Brien) and a Native American soldier Kiowa, which is parallel to the relationship between the Lone Ranger and Tonto. Like Tonto, Kiowa has very little agency in *Things*. Kiowa’s Native American identity is only minimally described, and he obediently follows other characters. In the end, he is miserably killed in the literal “shit field” of a Vietnamese village. In short, the narrator O’Brien imagines the ethnocentric stories in which the Native American character plays only a supporting role of the white protagonist.¹⁵ Chardwick Allen discusses the cultural significance of the Lone Ranger:

The thousands of Lone Ranger texts produced during the 1940s and 1950s offer dominant White Americans a self-portrait in which their golden age of mid-nineteenth-century western expansion is glorified as a noble and necessary endeavor, their interactions with indigenous peoples as an ideal of good intentions, and their involvement in large-scale war as an exercise in negotiating local submission to U.S. expansionist goals through the strategic employment of indigenous allies. (618-619)

The Lone Ranger embraces U.S. imperialism in the age of the Cold War. By reenacting the role of the Lone Ranger, the narrator O’Brien self-critically demonstrates how white Americans reproduce the frontier myth in the Vietnam War. In “On the Rainy River,” the character O’Brien identifies himself with the Lone Ranger: “All of us, I suppose, like to believe that in a moral emergency we will behave like the heroes of our youth, bravely and

forthrightly, without thought of personal loss or discredit. Certainly that was my conviction back in the summer of 1968. Tim O'Brien: a secret hero. The Lone Ranger" (39). In this story, O'Brien identifies himself with his childhood hero when he is forced to choose between fighting the war and fleeing from it. His naïve belief that he can be courageous—for him, being courageous means to escape from the war—is shattered when he is actually forced to choose between these two. In short, the author uses the nostalgic cultural image of the Lone Ranger to expose the impossibility of such heroism in the age of the Vietnam War: in other stories (most significantly in "Speaking of Courage" and "In the Field"), the white soldiers can no more save Kiowa than they can Mary Anne. However, at the same time, the impossibility of saving Kiowa can be also read as the elicitation of the white soldiers' anxiety about their manhood. Thus, the narrator consciously reproduces the framework of the frontier myth. The rewriting of the Lone Ranger myth causes the same effect as that of the captivity narrative: it self-critically foregrounds white men's imagination that marginalizes women and racial minorities in their fantasy.

To conclude, O'Brien's rewriting of the captivity narrative can be read as a postmodern parody of the national frontier myth. Linda Hutcheon states:

What I mean by "parody" here . . . is *not* the ridiculing imitation of the standard theories and definitions that are rooted in eighteenth-century theories of wit. The collective weight of parodic *practice* suggests a redefinition of parody as repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signaling of difference at the very heart of similarity. (26)

O'Brien's characters reproduce the frontier myth which reinforces the boundary between public and private spheres, battle and home fronts: however, by using the device of metafiction, O'Brien shows it with "critical distance." Paradoxically, it criticizes white American's imagination by reproducing the same type of the frontier myth. As is clear in the image of Vietnam as "Indian country," the repetition of the history and/or culture has played a significant part in the making of American empire. Through the self-referential fictionality of his stories, O'Brien performatively joins in the process of cultural/historical repetition with "critical distance." Mary Anne becomes free at the end of the story; however, she is never "free" from white men's imaginations. She is eventually captured by white men's imaginations, and O'Brien's metafiction self-critically shows these narratives reinforce the imperialistic boundary between foreign and domestic.

2. Daniel Cano's "Somewhere Outside Duc Pho"

In Daniel Cano's "Somewhere Outside Duc Pho," a Mexican American soldier Jesse Peña mysteriously disappears from his battery in Duc Pho, Quang Ngai Province.¹⁶ Peña disappears into the Vietnamese wilderness as Mary Anne does in "Sweetheart." The title of Cano's short story reminds one of the ending of "Sweetheart": "If you believed the Greenies, Rat said, Mary Anne was still somewhere outside there in the dark" (115-116). It is not clear if Cano wrote this story as a response to O'Brien's short story; however, in spite of obvious differences between these two stories, "Duc Pho" has significant similarities with "Sweetheart." Firstly, both stories are a part of the novel-in-stories, *Shifting Loyalties* and *The Things They Carried*. In both novels-in-stories the Vietnam veterans recall their experience in the war twenty years later.¹⁷ Secondly, in "Duc Pho" Peña mysteriously disappears in the middle of the war, and the narrator focuses on how his disappearance affects other soldiers. Thus, the characters' consciousness about storytelling is crucial in "Duc Pho," too. Cano and O'Brien make it clear that they cannot represent their experience in the war in a straightforward fashion, and their use of metafictional technique supports the theme of the character's mysterious disappearance.¹⁸ Finally, Cano also foregrounds the theme of the family and the nation state in "Duc Pho." As in "Sweetheart," the disappearance of a Mexican American soldier evokes American soldiers' anxiety about the vulnerability of their family and nation state.

In "Duc Pho," Peña mysteriously disappears from his battery. His disappearance remains inexplicable until the end of the story, but white soldiers spread a rumor that he is fighting against the United States with the Viet Cong. Mexican American soldiers discuss the significance of his disappearance. They mostly agree that the white soldiers' rumor is unreliable, but they cannot reach a conclusion: he might have deserted from the war; he might have been kidnapped; he might have had a traumatic experience in the battlefield and gone insane; or, as the white soldiers speculate, he might have run off to join the Viet Cong. On the day Peña is supposed to finish his duty as a soldier, the Mexican American soldiers hold a final meeting called "session." At first they gravely mourn Peña's disappearance, but their session heats up when one soldier raises the issue of racism in the United States. The Mexican American soldiers had previously avoided the topic until then, but they vehemently start to describe the discrimination they have experienced both in the U.S. military and back home. They belligerently denounce the white supremacy, and talk about the irony of fighting for the United States. For the Mexican American soldiers, Peña's sudden disappearance transforms

the Vietnam War into a racial war between Mexican Americans and white Americans. Their final session ends in chaotic drinking, and “nobody talked about Jesse any longer” (100).

Cano foregrounds the theme of storytelling in “Duc Pho.” One of the most significant changes added to the original short story version of “Duc Pho” is that the story is mostly told from the viewpoint of a veteran David Almas twenty years after Peña disappears.¹⁹ “Duc Pho” in *Shifting Loyalties* metafictionally highlights the uncertainty of the story. Before starting the story about Peña’s disappearance, Almas adds a proviso that “[most] guys denied it ever happened” and even if it did happen it happened “[probably] not like I remember” (75). Furthermore, Almas states: “Life is like a story, each incident another chapter, each person another character. And I’m part of that story, sometimes fiction, sometimes reality. . . . Everything is unreliable. There is no truth, no reality” (74). Reality and fiction are inseparable in his mind. By adding these provisos, Almas demonstrates the fictionality of the stories about Peña’s disappearance. The significance of Peña’s disappearance cannot be determined; instead, readers are encouraged to pay attention to the process in which Peña’s mysterious disappearance generates various kinds of apocryphal stories.²⁰

Peña’s character should be also understood in light of the theme of storytelling. Peña was a great storyteller: “After each operation, the guys looked forward to their sessions and Jesse’s stories” (79); “He’d switch from English to Spanish in mid-sentence, his voice rhythmical, a blend of talk-laugh, where even tragic stories became lighthearted. . . . His speech had a sophistication that didn’t come with schooling but with breeding. Someplace in his family’s poverty, there was an honest appreciation of language” (80). But after his horrible experience in the battlefield, his “rhythmical” voice is lost. One soldier testifies: “[Peña was] soaked, dirty, smelly and he’s talking’ a hunder’ miles’ an hour. Had to slow ’em down. Hunder’ miles an hour, *ese* [sic]” (87). The description of his experience in the battlefield is never given in the story: eloquent Peña suddenly disappears without explaining anything, and both the Mexican American soldiers and readers are left wondering as to the cause. In other words, Peña stops being an authentic storyteller; the absence of an authentic storyteller generates apocryphal stories.

White soldiers create fantastic stories about Peña’s disappearance, highlighting Peña’s collaboration with the Viet Cong. The Tiger Force witnesses “a chubby Mexican-looking-type guy,” who looks like “a commie,” walks “right along with them gooks” (78). Peña’s racial identity is emphasized in other testimonies too: “The guy looked like a Mexican” “It was not mistaken identity . . . I stared right at the Mexican” (90). From these testimonies Peña’s American nationality is obliterated. For white soldiers, Peña is a “Mexican” rather than an

“American.” Indeed, it is easy to see overt racial stereotype in the white soldiers’ fantastic story about Peña: “Some guys said they saw him selling fish tacos in the Mekong Delta. Others said he was running drugs near the DMZ. . . . he probably started a *mariachi* in Hanoi or owned a burrito stand near Haiphong” (100-101). Another significant characteristic of the white soldiers’ testimonies is their insistence that they have seen Peña with their own eyes. Almas says:

The stories about Americans leading Vietcong squads weren’t unusual. Everyone had heard them. But the traitors, or Americans-turned-VC, almost always had blonde hair, blue eyes, were tall and thin. Nobody who told the stories ever saw the defectors. Always it was, “I heard this from a friend of a cat in C Company” or, “Hey, check what a dude back in Phan Rhang told me.” The stories were really fables or myths, sort of a military anti-war protest. What made the story about Jesse so different was that the guys reporting it were claiming to have personally seen him. (91)

While a white soldier’s “betrayal” is made into a fable or myth, the plausibility of a Mexican American soldier’s collaboration with the Viet Cong is emphasized in the stories told by white soldiers: the brown soldier missing from the U.S. military becomes a real threat for them. In other words, for white soldiers a Mexican American soldier’s national identity is dubious. Without any evidence, they interpret Peña’s disappearance as solidarity with “communists”: the white soldiers read the undecipherable disappearance of a Mexican American soldier as subversion to U.S. hegemony.^{2 1} However, from the Mexican American soldiers’ viewpoint, Peña’s collaboration with the Viet Cong is less plausible. In a conversation with the Mexican American soldiers, Almas says: “Guys just don’t run off and join the enemy . . . It don’t happen in real life . . . only in stories, movies. It just don’t happen that way” (89). For the Mexican American soldiers, Peña’s collaboration with the Viet Cong is another kind of myth, which is based on white Americans’ unjust distrust of Mexican American soldiers’ loyalty. Thus, a Mexican American soldier Alex calls the Tiger Force “a bunch of fuckin’ racists grunts” (81).

For white men, the image of racial minorities’ conspiracy inside and outside the United States was very powerful because of the Civil Rights movement. In contrast with the conventional captivity narrative’s concern about white Americans’ masculinity, the white soldiers in “Duc Pho” are anxious about potential rebellion from Mexican-American men. In other words, the conventional captivity narrative shows white men’s anxiety about lack of freedom, while “Duc Pho” reveals white men’s anxiety about Mexican Americans’ freedom.

White men try to reinforce the national/ gender/ racial boundaries by creating a fantasy of a Mexican American man who becomes unbound from the nationality and “goes native.” White men in “Sweetheart” and “Duc Pho” thus create similar kinds of fantasies in their stories: as Mary Anne becomes aware in Vietnam of the yoke of the domesticity, the Mexican American soldiers become aware of the racial oppression inside the United States through their service in Vietnam. White men imagine that the foundation of the nation state is threatened by women and racial minorities’ conspiracy with the Vietnamese. Indeed, in her research into the influence of the Cold War on the Civil Rights movement, historian Mary L. Dudziak argues: “Radio Moscow used racial violence in renewed propaganda attacks. The United States was ‘on the brink of civil war’ . . . Soviet propaganda drew a link between violence in the nation’s inner cities and the war in Vietnam, suggesting that the greatest threats might come from the warfare at home” (243-245). America was under siege both internally and externally; the fantastic image of Mexican American men conspiring with the Third World undermined the ideal of American democracy in the Cold War.

However, for the Mexican American soldiers, Peña’s disappearance has a much more complicated significance: it can be read as both masculine rebellion toward the United States and feminine escape from the battlefield. His disappearance questions the significance of Mexican American masculinity: the emergence of the Chicano moratorium movement (the Chicano anti-war movement) in the late 1960s dramatically called into question the significance of Mexican American men’s tradition of machismo. Historian Steven Rosales argues: “the call for social justice by the Chicano movement during the 1960s increasingly called into question the warrior patriotism associated with martial citizenship and machismo” (301). Before he disappears, Peña plays the role of an ideal American soldier, arbitrating Mexican American soldiers’ conflicts within the military: “Jesse had never been in trouble before. He was the one who kept everyone else out of trouble, making sure the guys got back to camp after a crazy day in town or calming them down after a run-in with an NCO or officer” (90). Even outside the U.S. military Peña’s behavior is a role model for the Mexican American soldiers. He loves his hometown San Antonio, Texas (80); he loves his family, and goes to Communion every Sunday (86). Peña is pious, loves his family, and obediently follows military orders: he is a traditional, “correct” macho in Gloria Anzaldúa’s terms.^{2 2} As many critics point out, Mexican Americans have had a long tradition of engagement with the U.S. military. This involvement in the U.S. military was popular for several reasons. Firstly, it symbolically meant their assimilation into the mainstream American society. Secondly, it gave them economical advantage as well as educational opportunity. And most importantly, it was

endorsed by their cultural tradition of machismo. George Mariscal argues: “The drive to assimilate through military service is exacerbated by one of the most pernicious legacies of Mexican culture: warrior patriotism. The idea that masculine behavior must include a readiness to die for ‘la patria’ is powerful in Mexican nationalist ideology” (27).^{2 3} Symbolically, Mexican American soldiers fought for their country, racial community, and the family.^{2 4} Since this model premises Mexican American men’s assimilation into American society through military service, the country, racial community and their family are identified together in this ideal. In short, for Mexican American men, manliness traditionally meant self-sacrifice for nation and family.

However, the Chicano moratorium movement questioned the cultural tradition of machismo. In “Duc Pho,” a Mexican American soldier Hector talks about the emergence of the moratorium movement in California: “a lot of hard-core *cholos* were leaving the gangs and joining the anti-war movement, wearing *sarapes* and *huaraches*, growing ponytails, beards, even enrolling in city college” (82). A different type of Mexican American masculinity was created by the anti-war movement, as militant youths insist that Mexican Americans withdraw from the war. Indeed, one participant in the moratorium movement stated: “We aren’t shedding our machismo. We were proving our machismo by asking the establishment the tough question, ‘Why are we dying overseas when the real struggle is at home?’” (Oropeza 149). Thus, the moratorium movement redefined the significance of Mexican Americans’ tradition of machismo. In her excellent book about the Chicano moratorium movement *¡Raza Si! ¡Guerra No!*, historian Lorena Oropeza argues that the moratorium movement was another type of celebration of masculinity and patriarchy rather than a sign of equality between men and women.^{2 5} Even so, the moratorium movement denied the traditional Mexican American men’s tactic of assimilation into mainstream American society through military service. To put it differently, while the Mexican American community, family and the nation state were traditionally identified together in the model of “warrior patriotism,” the moratorium movement separated the nation state from Mexican American community and family. The “imagined community” is now not a nation state, but a racial community. “Warrior patriotism” encouraged men to fight *for* the nation state, and in this context it is similar to white American’s patriarchal ideology shown in the conventional captivity narrative, except Mexican American men are frequently required to serve in more dangerous combats;^{2 6} in contrast, the moratorium movement encouraged Mexican American men to fight *against* the nation state. Mexican American men’s primary significance in the community is not largely changed by this movement, but machismo in this movement is

markedly different from white American's patriarchy in that the nation state is distinguished from the racial community and the family. Thus, the moratorium movement deconstructs the distinction between the "battle front" and the "home front": the "home front" becomes a battlefield for Mexican American community.

"Duc Pho" needs to be further examined in this historical context. Since Cano's mysterious disappearance shows Mexican American soldiers' ambivalent position in their racial community in the age of the moratorium movement, the Mexican American soldiers in "Duc Pho" repeatedly discuss the significance of Peña's disappearance. For the white soldiers Peña's disappearance simply means conspiracy between the racial minorities, but Mexican American soldiers cannot believe it. Thus, the Mexican American soldiers gradually become alienated in their batteries. They find "an isolated spot, an eerie-looking place near the camp's perimeter, separated from the rest of the brigade by a decaying sandbag wall about four-feet high" (82) to have their "sessions." In the final session, they find a further isolated place near borderline between American and Viet Cong territories: "The jungle moved closer, the roots, leaves and trunks swelling. The trees came down on their heads like thick spider webs and the plants weighed against their backs" (97). Like Peña and Mary Anne, they are almost assimilated with the Vietnamese land here. However, after they move on to the issues of racism in the United States, they forget about Peña and "the jungle, once again, distanced itself from them" (100). The jungle distances itself from the Mexican American soldiers because they narrowly understand the significance of Peña's disappearance. They simplify the mystery of Peña's disappearance into the story of racial conflict in the United States, implicitly agreeing to the contemporary Chicano moratorium movement. Indeed, when Hector raises the issue of racism in the United States, he talks about "the truth": "What the others wanted was to fight the war, get to the rear area, drink, joke and never think about the truth . . . in Vietnam or about their lives back home" (98). They create an anti-war fantasy from Peña's mysterious disappearance. Mexican American soldiers' tradition of "warrior patriotism" is harshly criticized in this fantasy: "Yeah, like *pendejos* . . . we do whatever nobody else wants to do. We don't want to be crybabies, 'better to die on yer feet than live on yer knees . . .' ain't that what we learn, all that macho shit?" (99). The more they highlight racial inequity in the United States and sympathize with the Vietnamese, the more contradictory the significance of their engagement in the U.S. military becomes. Given their predicament back in the United States, it is indeed *a* truth about their race: but when it is demonstrated as *the* truth, the complicated significance of Peña's disappearance—in other words, the fluctuating significance of machismo—is dispelled. This is why their session abruptly ends in chaotic

drinking: their status as Cold War warriors is ultimately incompatible with the Chicano moratorium movement back home, so their sympathy with the movement is halfhearted and does not last long.

Finally, it is noteworthy that critics have also misunderstood the ambivalent significance of Peña's disappearance to some extent: they miss the author's foregrounding of the theme of storytelling. Catherine Calloway mostly examines the scene of the Mexican American soldiers' final session, and argues: "The tone of the Chicano literature that has emerged from the Vietnam War is often one of protest" (150); B. V. Olguín concludes: "Cano's Chicano subject refuses to be contained within an assimilationist model of difference that ultimately preserves US hegemonic claims to 'America' and 'Americanness' as well as US imperialist designs of the Third World" (103). These critics see the "final session" as a climax of the story, rather than anti-climax. They do not pay attention to the narrator's repeated reference to the inexplicability of Peña's disappearance and the Mexican American soldiers' ambivalent position in the light of the moratorium movement. "Duc Pho" is narrowly understood by these critics as the "protest literature." However, this is not to say that machismo based on the "warrior patriotism" is superior to that of Chicano moratorium movement. My point is that Mexican American soldiers experienced a turning point of their cultural traditions in the Vietnam War: the significance of machismo fluctuated in this specific time period, and Peña's undecipherable disappearance mirrors its fluctuating significance. In other words, by not giving specific significance to Peña's disappearance, the Mexican soldiers—especially Almas—refuse to choose between cultural assimilation and independence, between traditional machismo and new machismo. For Almas, the significance of machismo is still fluctuating twenty years later. Before starting his story about Peña's disappearance, Almas "sat back in the L-shaped gray sofa and sipped coffee from the 'Best Dad in the World' cup his grown children had given him on Father's day" (73). Moreover, an hour before, he quarrels with his wife and "had thrown open the front door and started to walk out" (73), but refrains from doing so after his wife tells him to get out and never come back. The significance of Mexican American fatherhood is still in negotiation in Almas' family, and he thinks about the significance of running from one's country and family by retelling Peña's story.

To conclude, on the one hand, O'Brien and Cano's rewriting of the captivity narrative as "missing" stories illuminates white men's unchanging anxiety about the vulnerability of their family and the nation state. In this fantasy women and racial minorities "go native," conspiring with the Vietnamese in the "last frontier." In this context these two stories need to

be read in the light of the domestic history and culture of the United States in the 1960s: if the conventional captivity narrative shows the American family/nation state under siege of foreigners, “Sweetheart” and “Duc Pho” shows that the true enemy to the American family/nation state is inside the United States. On the other, their rewriting of the captivity narrative criticizes such anxiety of white men by foregrounding how they reproduce the frontier myth. Since O’Brien underlines his guiltiness as a white male soldier, O’Brien’s metafiction is more sophisticated than that of Cano’s in terms of its form. However, these two stories can be read as postmodern parodies of the captivity narrative, because they both leave the protagonists “missing.” Mary Anne and Peña never return to American domesticity, and it makes the “master narrative”—American home secured by white men’s heroism—unstable. What readers can see is not the truth about their disappearance but various kinds of apocryphal fantasies about it. Furthermore, Cano’s story questions the authenticity of Mexican American’s tradition of machismo in the Vietnam War. By so doing, he shows how Mexican American family is fluctuating in the age of the Chicano moratorium movement. In different ways, “Sweetheart” and “Duc Pho” show how the norms of the American families interacted with American empire abroad. The Vietnam War cannot be told from a monolithic viewpoint; if it was truly the “first terrible postmodern war” (Jameson 44), its diverse significance should be examined in the light of specific historical background.

Notes

¹ One significant exception to this point is the narrative of Mary Jemison. Jemison eventually chose to live with the Native Americans, and her captivity narrative is told second-hand. See Naimas 145-203.

² See Franklin 16-24 for the arbitrary definition of these categories.

³ See Dunnaway and Jarvis 137-142. From the perspective of the Native American soldier, the image of Vietnam as Indian country is very problematic. One Seneca Vietnam veteran states: “When I got to the bush, my platoon sergeant tells me and the guys I came in with that we were surrounded. He said: ‘The gooks are all out there and we’re here. This is Fort Apache, boys, and out there is Indian country.’ Can you fuckin’ believe that? To me? I should have shot him right then and there. Made me wonder who the real enemy was” (Holm 129).

⁴ See Zaretsky 25-70 and Franklin 1-126 for more detailed discussion about the history of captured American soldiers and national discourse concerning this issue. Also, the image of captive white men was highlighted again in the Iran hostage crisis from 1979 to 1981. See McAlister 198-234. The reference to this incident can be found in John Updike’s *Rabbit Is Rich*, and Robinson argues that it reflects white men’s anxiety that “American manhood is made weak primarily by experience in and with the Third World” (46).

⁵ According to Franklin, “[for] World War II, . . . the 78,750 still unaccounted for represent 19.4 percent of the total 405,399 killed. For the Korean War, more than 15 percent of the dead are still unaccounted for. In contrast, the 2,273 unaccounted for from the Indochina war constitute less than 4 percent of the 58,152 killed”

(12).

⁶ See Sturken 85-121, Jeffords, Franklin 127-166, and Savran 197-210 for more detailed analyses of the mythical representations of POW/MIA in Vietnam War films and novels.

⁷ See Naimas 49-83.

⁸ According to Jarvis, “as an adjective, *bong* means ‘snow white’ but as a verb it signifies the act of ‘peeling’” (138).

⁹ See Zaretsky 9-17 and May 198-216.

¹⁰ For more detailed discussion of metafiction, see Hutcheon.

¹¹ Clarke argues that the necklace of human tongues symbolizes the violence on the level of the narrative: Mary Anne makes the Vietnamese silent (139).

¹² In *The Anarchy of the Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture*, Amy Kaplan argues: “The idea of the nation as home . . . is inextricable from the political, economic, and cultural movements of empire, movements that both erect and unsettle the ever-shifting boundaries between the domestic and foreign, between ‘at home’ and ‘abroad’” (1).

¹³ However, Smith’s overall argument is not very persuasive because she implicitly suggests that the white soldiers (including the narrator O’Brien) are unconsciously making up a misogynistic fantasy. Rather, the author self-consciously depicts the process in which he and other white soldiers imagine stories which reinforces traditional gender hierarchy. As Clarke puts it, “It is one thing to simply replicate, unself-consciously, the problems of American ideology. It is another thing to do so in a thoughtful, self-critical way—the very thing that a self-reflexive metafictional form can accomplish” (147).

¹⁴ Susan Farrell’s argument that the story subverts traditional gender boundaries is also unpersuasive; although she argues that Mary Anne finally switched sides and joined the Viet Cong (17), from the text one can find no evidence which supports her speculation.

¹⁵ See Dunnaway and Clarke for the discussion of ethnocentrism in *Things*.

¹⁶ Although the terms “Chicano” and “Mexican American” are nowadays used interchangeably, in this essay I use the term “Chicano” mostly for designating participants in the Chicano movement in the 1960s, while I use “Mexican American” to describe Americans of Mexican origin in general. See Oropeza xvii. In this context, Peña and other soldiers in “Duc Pho” are not necessarily “Chicanos.” As I will argue later, these soldiers’ distance toward Chicano movement is relatively ambiguous. Therefore, in this essay I use the term “Mexican Americans” for them.

¹⁷ In this essay I mostly examine “Duc Pho” in *Shifting Loyalties* rather than in its original short story format because it underlines its similarity with O’Brien’s fictions.

¹⁸ O’Brien states: “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” (82). Similarly, Cano states in the beginning of *Shifting Loyalties*: “If my writing comes out fragmented, some points not completely explained, some characters out of place, some incidents explained too much, forgive me, for that’s how Vietnam lives in my mind. Twenty years disfigures the faces, muffles the words, blurs the scenes, yet the stories remain honest, the memories sincere” (13). These two authors similarly discuss the difficulty of representing their experience in the war; at the same time, they still believe in the power of stories.

¹⁹ Another significant change is that in *Shifting Loyalties* “Duc Pho” does not end with these soldiers’ “final session.” In *Shifting Loyalties* one Mexican American soldier Alex is injured after the final session and insists that he saw Peña with his own eyes. However, Almas refuses to see him and talk about it: until the end of the story the readers cannot know if Peña truly fights with the Viet Cong.

²⁰ However, Cano’s metafiction is less sophisticated than O’Brien’s in terms of its form: as a white male veteran, O’Brien needs to criticize himself much more than Cano does.

²¹ Among the white soldiers’ testimonies, the most plausible one is John Conklin’s. His description about

Peña's physical characteristic is mostly accurate; however, he states Peña is "probably 145 or 150 pounds," while actually he is "closer to 185, maybe 190" (93). It is possible that Peña loses his weight, but it is not very clear if one can identify him with Peña.

^{2 2} See Anzaldúa 83.

^{2 3} See also Oropeza 22-34, Ybarra and Rosales.

^{2 4} It is also notable that the "warrior patriotism" was passed from fathers to sons in Chicano families. In "Duc Pho," one Chicano soldier says: "Our *jeffitos* worked to build the States. My old man fought in WWII. My uncle Tino died in some shitty field in Korea. We got rights just like anybody else" (98). Also, in "Planting the Seeds," David Almas talks about the legacy of his father's engagement in the war.

^{2 5} See Oropeza 108.

^{2 6} For example, see Oropeza 25-26. In "Duc Pho," one Chicano soldier states: "Whatever the gover'ment wants to push on you guys, you just take it. Medic in B Company says he gets more wounded Mexicans an' Puerto Ricans than anybody else . . . think you guys are supermen" (99).

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ベトナム戦争文学における Captivity Narrative の再考：ティム・オブライエンとダニエル・カーノの短編を読む

関口 洋平

本論文は Tim O'Brien の “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” と Daniel Cano の “Somewhere Outside Duc Pho” というベトナム戦争に関する短編小説を比較検討するものである。ベトナム戦争文学における captivity narrative としては *The First Blood* や *Missing In Action* といった映像作品が有名で、これらの作品においては囚われた白人男性がフロンティアにおける「他者」との戦いを経て男性性を取り戻す過程が表象されている。しかし本論文で分析する二つの短編は、「戦場」と「家庭」、あるいは男性性と女性性の境界を再強化するようなこれらの作品と共通点を持ちながらも、最終的にはそれらの境界を再強化する白人男性兵士を巧みなメタフィクションにより批判している。

前者の短編においては白人女性が、後者の短編においてはメキシコ系アメリカ人男性が、それぞれベトナムで失踪する。本論文では、フロンティアにおいて「白人の家族」あるいは「アメリカ」が「他者」により脅かされる、という伝統的な captivity narrative における白人男性の「不安」が各々の短編においてどのように表象・批判されているかを分析する。その際に、これらの短編が「物語」と「歴史」の境界の曖昧さを繰り返し前景化していることに注目する。双方の短編における主人公の「失踪」は、白人兵士/メキシコ系アメリカ人兵士たちの異なった「不安」を映し出す幻想としての物語となる。そのような「不安」をベトナム戦争期のアメリカにおける国内問題（フェミニズムの隆盛、公民権運動）との関連で考えることにより、各々の物語における「失踪」の意味を歴史的・文化的な背景のもとでより深く理解することを本論文は目指している。