

Re-membering Vietnam: War, Trauma, and “Scarring Over” After “The Wall”

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The era of the Vietnam War was one of the most tumultuous in American history. It was a time that dismembered individuals, families, and much of the government and society—physically, psychologically, and intellectually. The process of addressing the Vietnam War has been helped along by distance and time, which have allowed for historical analyses, but one of the main catalysts for its reconciliation in American cultural history has been the Vietnam Veterans Memorial wall.

This article is an analysis of how a wall, something generally meant to separate, protect, or keep people in or out, has become a cultural phenomenon as an agent of healing. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial, generally referred to simply as “The Wall,” has helped to re-member, put back together, or re-engage individuals, families, and much of the government and society through a process of remembering that has addressed physical, psychological, and intellectual trauma—quite an astonishing feat, since this was done primarily through a minimalist work of art designed by a college student. The memorial consists of two black granite wings, each almost two hundred and fifty feet long, which meet at an obtuse angle that is submerged into the landscape of the National Mall, a green space between the Lincoln and Washington Memorials, and in the far back yard of the White House, in Washington DC. Yet it is precisely the nonrepresentational nature of The Wall, rather

than the figural nationalism typical of war memorials, that promotes interaction through the names etched on its surface, reconciliation through the items visitors are instigated to leave there, and healing because it brings the subversive subject of the Vietnam War into the open. These characteristics have made The Wall effective, and a standard by which subsequent memorials of war or catastrophe are measured.

When we remember Vietnam, whether the war itself or the era that surrounds it, we bring up an uneasy past. The controversy that was part of that history plagued the The Wall’s development, particularly the design itself, which was subjected to revisions and compromise. The multitude of meanings inscribed in The Wall reflect larger cultural issues as basic as right and wrong, good and bad, and as complicated as gender inequity, racism, constructions of identity, masculinities, and cultural, social, and political memory. A number of writers have discussed The Wall as a reflection of past and present society. In her essay, “The Wall, The Screen and the Image: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial,” Marita Sturken suggests that “the black walls of the memorial act as screens for innumerable projections of memory and history—of the United States’ participation in the Vietnam War and the experience of the Vietnam veterans since the war” (163).

Unlike previous wars, many of which ended with parades or some type of respectful display

for those who had served, Vietnam was a travesty. Many people protested the war, and many men who were drafted went reluctantly or ran away, becoming known as “draft dodgers.” In addition, unlike earlier accounts of war, such as newsreels that gave updates during World War II, episodes from Vietnam were shown frequently on the nightly news and in newspapers. Those who fought in the war and those who objected to it were often vilified while the war dragged on with no positive outcome. Veterans who returned to the United States often had psychological problems brought on by the anxiety that was part of jungle warfare. Others contracted diseases related to the jungle or chemicals used to aid fighting. Many veterans were treated with hostility and returned to shouts of “baby killer” or “murderer,” and veterans were even spat upon. Veterans often submitted to a kind of internal forgetting, or denial, in which they disassociated themselves from Vietnam by becoming model citizens so as not to be identified with the war or stereotypes that portrayed Vietnam veterans as social outcasts.

The aftermath of the Vietnam era was traumatic and can be characterized through marginalization, confusion, and loss, yet the phenomenon of The Wall is remarkable. Since its dedication on November 13, 1982, the *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* has become a prototype for mourning and healing that has spawned many more created in the same spirit of healing. There is a virtual wall on the Internet, five half-scale moving walls that travel around the country, and numerous Web sites, including a “suicide wall” for those who allegedly committed suicide as a direct result of their service in Vietnam. There have also been art exhibitions connected to The Wall, numerous books and essays written about it, and displays revealing the varied items that people have left at the memorial.¹ By the end of the 1980s, less than a decade after it was built, the National Park Service estimated that over twenty million people, about ten percent of the American population at the time, had visited the memorial, the most frequented memorial site in Washington DC.²

Such staggering statistics are interesting to consider when the United States government did not attempt to recognize the Vietnam War until 1978. The recognition was reluctant, as Robin Wagner-Pacifici and Barry Schwartz relate in their article, “The Vietnam Veterans Memorial: Commemorating a Difficult Past”:

A Vietnam War crypt had already been prepared in the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, but the Army determined that neither of its two unidentified bodies (only 30% of the remains in either case) made for a decent corpse. Instead of honoring its Vietnam battle dead by symbolically joining them, through entombment of unknown soldiers' remains, with men fallen in earlier wars, the army recommended that a plaque and display of medals be set apart behind the tomb, along with the inscription: “Let all know that the United States of America pays tribute to the members of the Armed Forces who answered their country's call.” This strange declaration bears no reference at all to the Vietnam War, and it required an act of the Veterans Affairs subcommittee to make it more specific: “Let all people know that the United States pays tribute to those members of the Armed Forces who served honorably in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam era.” (385)

War was not to be mentioned in the accompanying inscription, however. Indeed, there seemed to be an overwhelming negative reaction in the government and military to remembering Vietnam. Vietnam was subject to a kind of “erasure,” perhaps because if it were called a war, the question of “win” or “lose” would emerge. Upon hearing about the proposal to build the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, a Pentagon official asked why anyone would want to build a memorial to losers (Scruggs and Swerdlow 30). This is the kind of remembering that the officials wanted to avoid: that of defeat. Such a response is tied up in the masculine aesthetics of war itself. Wars that are won are testaments to national virility. Losing a war is a kind of castration, and such associations for Vietnam suggested “its very name (Vietnam) is a curse” (Caputo 224).

The circumstances that led to creating The Wall are now legendary. In 1979, Vietnam War veteran Jan Scruggs decided that those who fought and died in Vietnam should be remembered. As is the case in private remembering that becomes public, exactly how Scruggs came to this realization is unclear. There are three different versions about the genesis of the idea. In the most common version endorsed in his memoir, *To Heal a Nation*, Scruggs decided that a memorial was necessary after seeing the movie *The Deerhunter* (1978). A second version has Scruggs reading about “delayed stress syndrome,” and still a third has Scruggs coming to the realization while “nursing a bottle of bourbon” (Wagner-Pacifi and Schwartz 390–91). The latter two versions are problematic because they link the Vietnam Veterans Memorial to an aheroic birth related to mental illness and alcohol. In contrast, linking a Hollywood version of the Vietnam War to the memorial’s construction, ironically, becomes noble.

Yet these versions reflect the way in which Scruggs’s desire to build The Wall was instigated around the idea of trauma. Much of the language surrounding the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is inscribed with wounding and scarring. This idea of scarring refers to trauma. One veteran says, “My scars can’t be seen or touched, but they are deeper than any round that could have been fired” (Lopes 85). The designer herself, Maya Ying Lin, refers to the memorial in these terms: “I thought about what death is, what a loss it is,” she remembers, “A sharp pain that lessens with time, but can never quite heal over. A scar” (Campbell 151). Wagner-Pacifi and Schwartz observe that because Jan Scruggs had been wounded in Vietnam and still carries in him eleven pieces of a grenade, he becomes, particularly through his efforts to build a memorial, a kind of poster boy for Vietnam veterans’ virtue and manhood:

The fact that Scruggs was recognized as a wounded veteran is very important. Wounds in general play a significant role in the discourse about the Vietnam veterans and their memorial. That Scruggs’ wounds are invariably noted means that he is understood

to speak authoritatively for the needs of the veterans. Wounds are legitimating marks. The body of the veteran is, itself, the proof of intimate experience with war, of courage and manhood. Scruggs’ wounds make him a generalizable veteran, a collective representation in his own right. This characterization of Scruggs as, first and foremost, a wounded veteran has the effect of invoking the traditional notion of war hero. With that invocation, the traditional notion of a war memorial becomes more plausible. (390)

Ultimately, The Wall has become a site for bearing those wounds honorably, despite the outcome of the war, and ultimately for healing the scars that remain as memories of the war and its era.

This trauma, wounding, and scarring is visible in The Wall’s design. The design was decided by a nationwide competition overseen by the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, which had been established to collect private donations for the project.³ The competition guidelines allowed anyone eighteen years of age or older and an American citizen to enter, and insisted that the design be reflective and contemplative in nature, harmonize with its surroundings, be entirely apolitical, and include all of the names of the almost 58,000 dead and missing.⁴ Lin is famous for incorporating these predetermined qualities into the memorial. The competition was presented to a Yale funerary architecture class as “Problem #3.” Twenty-year-old Lin composed a simple design of a wall of black granite consisting of two sides that met at a vertex in the ground.

After Lin’s design was chosen, controversy occurred primarily because of the nonrepresentational nature of The Wall, but also because the young designer was not a veteran, was a woman, and was of Asian decent. It appeared that a bunch of old men with conservative political views and little understanding of aesthetics had a problem with it. But there was more going on. The battles were, I believe, about residual trauma surrounding Vietnam, and the need to finally codify a “proper” response to Vietnam, whether it be mourning or reverence or pride.

A minimalist work of art is generally an unadorned form complete with hard edges, right angles, and little or no decoration or detail. Because of its simplicity, *The Wall* generally does not forge a particular meaning.⁵ According to Lin, "it is up to each individual to resolve or come to terms with this loss. For in the end death is a personal and private matter, and the area contained within this memorial is a quiet place meant for personal reflection and private reckoning" (Lin 4:05). This respect for the individual's own encounter with death became part of the problem. Opponents attacked the memorial's ambiguity. For some, *The Wall's* angle resembled the "V" associated with the antiwar protest in which making the form with one's index and middle fingers was a sign of "peace," and suggested that this made the memorial a tribute to people like Jane Fonda, the epitome of the antiwar protester. Others saw the chevron shape of *The Wall* in a military context because it resembled the rank designation for the private (or "PFC"), who bore the brunt of fighting in the war. Others saw it as a vaginal shape.⁶

The minimalism of Lin's architecture advocates its contemplative qualities. These essential forms both allow and preempt attempts to attach programmed meanings to them. The forms used are so elementary and basic that their interpretation is simultaneously infinite and finite. These very specific forms lend themselves to enough ambiguity so as to allow the viewer his or her own interpretation and reaction. In essence, then, the controversy emerges partially from the success of the design.

Made of granite from Bangalore, India that was cut and fabricated in Barre, Vermont, each of *The Wall's* two wings is 246 feet, nine inches long (totaling 493' 6"), meeting at an angle of 125 degrees, twelve minutes. The east end of the chevron shape leads to the Washington Monument and the west to the Lincoln Memorial. The height of *The Wall* is ten feet, three inches at the center and moves out in either direction to eight inches. Set into the earth, the memorial acts as a scar in the landscape. Each wall consists of seventy numbered panels inscribed with names.

Each panel is three inches thick and forty inches wide and contains anywhere from one to 137 lines with five to six names per line. The names are .53 inches high and .015 inches deep.⁷

Names, which are the focal point of the memorial, are an aesthetic themselves. Here the cut letters emulate a gravestone and act as visual scars in an otherwise perfectly smooth surface. The significance of the name is self-evident: it is a label and method of identification. On *The Wall*, the name also serves as a historical marker. The largest panels tend to correspond to the heaviest years of casualties, as if to emphasize the volume of death during that year. The journey through the names is that of the journey through the war. For the survivors, the name is a point of recognition and acknowledgment. But even for those with no association to a specific name, the collection of all of the names creates a recognition of great loss. The viewer is confronted with the names of *The Wall* as a collective loss. One name adds up to many, which adds up to tragedy regardless of how one views the Vietnam War or the idea of war itself.

The names begin and end at the apex of *The Wall* and are listed chronologically by death date. A directory, set up like a phone book in alphabetical order, is available to help locate names. There are four at the west (Lincoln Memorial side) of *The Wall*, and one at the end of the east walkway. The entry gives the full name, date of death, branch of service, and hometown of each individual, along with the panel number and row where he or she is located on the memorial. Directories are now available on the Web as well.

The first to die are placed at the vertex on the east wall, the last to die are next to them on the west wall. Panel 1E lists the earliest death, beginning with the first advisors killed in Vietnam, and panel 70W lists the last, which includes men killed on a warship as the military evacuated.⁸ The names are right-justified on the west wall and left-justified on the east. This was meant to allow names to be added in case they had been omitted. The left and right justification visually pulls the viewer toward the center along a

descending walkway to where beginning and end meet. Such a listing contextualizes the name in history and situates it in real time. Lin “argued that this was essential to her design. The Wall, she said, would read like an epic Greek poem. Vets could find their story told, and their friends remembered, in the panel that corresponded to their tour of duty. Locating specific names, with the aid of a directory, would be like finding bodies on a battlefield” (“Vietnam Memorial” 571). Lin did this to give the war closure, making beginning and end meet so that the names and war would not continue off into the horizon but come together to help heal.

Next to each name a diamond marks the confirmed dead, and a cross designates the 1,300 missing. If MIA remains are returned, the cross is changed to a diamond. If returned alive, it will be changed to a circle. Not one MIA has been returned home alive. The names are listed so that the beginning of the alphabet is repeated to denote each new day of casualties. Lin states, “These names, seemingly infinite in number, convey the sense of overwhelming numbers, while unifying those individuals into a whole” (Lin 4:05). But the name also refers to an individual personality outside of and separate from The Wall. It therefore acts as key for remembering, re-membering the individual identity of each *person* listed because if we know that person, the name brings to mind a mental image of the individual. If we do not know the person, an imaginary image is perhaps formed.

In linguistic theory, the name is a referent or refers to an individual. If we know/knew that person, we form a mental picture encapsulating the individual’s identity. The name and the identity of the individual become interchangeable on The Wall. Often, when people approach The Wall in search of a name, they make remarks like “there he is.”⁹ This transmutation, identifying the individual with the name, is fairly common. Unlike a grave marker, the remains of the dead are not present, yet the name evokes a response as if they are. The names act as a conduit for communication between living and dead. Veteran Mike Hagen says, “It’s a place where you can go

and see your buddies. And I believe, still stay in contact with them” (Fish 25). The name of the individual as it appears on The Wall is more than a referent. Although the name should act only as a sign for the individual, it becomes, instead, the embodiment of the individual, perhaps because that is all that is really left of the person or what we know about him. The component of the name—a fragment of what each individual was—is a synecdoche, or stands for the whole man. All we need is the name to evoke the whole image or imagined image of the man.¹⁰

But we remember somewhat selectively and in fragments. When we remember an image of a person in our minds, it is like an old photograph that has faded or disintegrated, making us fill in the irresolute remnants with a conjectured image. Perhaps these imagined memories are created like the fictions of Vietnam veterans in television shows like *Magnum, P.I.* or the *A-Team* or movies that were prevalent in the 1980s. Or maybe the memories are things we wish to have happened. A sister puts a letter she has created, as if written from her dead brother, in front of his name on The Wall. In it he apologizes for wrecking her car before he went to Vietnam. Because he did not come home, he was never able to apologize. Her imagined words for him are on the left of the page, and on the right is her own response telling him it’s alright (Gans 322–23).

And yet the names are also reflections of ourselves. As the viewer looks at The Wall, he or she is reflected on its surface. Lin used polished black granite as a reflective surface that unifies the viewer with the piece, making the viewer actually become part of the work as he or she is reflected in it. One mother explained this effect in a letter to her dead son that she left at The Wall:

I could feel pulled toward this black wall and yet my feet didn’t want to move. I was so scared. I was afraid I would find your name on this wall and I was afraid that some mistake had been made and the name was left out. Then I saw it. My heart seemed to stop. I seemed to tremble. I shook as though I was freezing. My teeth chattered. I felt as though I couldn’t get my breath. How it

hurt. From *The Wall*, like a mirror reflecting through my blurry tears. I seemed to see faces. Then I realized it was not the faces of the ones who had died, but of the living, who were here, like me, to find the name of a loved one. (Scruggs and Swerdlow 134)

Here the faces of the living are superimposed over the names of the dead. Aesthetically, this is one of *The Wall's* most revolutionary attributes and one that Lin clearly intended. The grooves of the names do not reflect back—the effect is a kind of scarring. Just as the names are a scar in the smooth surface of the stone, so too are they scars on the reflected faces of the living, making visible the invisible pain of grief and bringing psychological scars into the open. People at The Wall, whether they are attached to a name on it, often erupt into tears—again making pain and mourning visible or even acceptable—bringing the subject of the war out from hiding and perhaps helping society to heal or scar over. If the names are, in fact, a kind of scar, through their inability to reflect, they become a visual manifestation of the wounds of the survivors.

Another phenomenon of The Wall and one that centers around the names is the “rubblings” that people take from The Wall. This is literally a sketched impression of the name created by placing a piece of paper over a name and rubbing a crayon or pencil over the covered surface. The edges of the name’s indentation are transferred to the paper. This is an artistic technique known as “frottage” and likely one everyone performed during childhood. If a name is too high, visitors use ladders or sit on someone else’s shoulders. People trace the names with their fingers, wanting to touch the carved names and take rubbings, perhaps so that they can have a bit of the person—because the name stands in for the individual—with them. It is as if making a rubbing and then taking one away means that you get a little piece of that person back.

One of the most interesting gestures occurs around these rubbings and is enacted by visitors who look for a name linked to someone they know. Often they make a rubbing in an effort to

connect to the memorial. The rubbings act as a kind of bearing witness, or perhaps a way to pay respects beyond the effort to visit the memorial. Some visitors even wish, I think, to mitigate pain with the gesture as if by touching the name they could absorb a bit of the sorrow associated with it. Giving a rubbing to a person related to a name becomes a kind of sympathy card. Such gestures are appropriate to the delayed grief surrounding many of the names on The Wall because of the historic situation of Vietnam.

This idea of absorbing sorrow can be difficult for veterans. Many living Vietnam veterans were originally bitter about being left out of the memorial. The simplicity of the memorial, however, includes them. It *remembers* the dead. In doing so, it also remembers the living. Even for the living veterans, The Wall has become a place to heal. Howard, a navy veteran from Long Island, left a letter at The Wall that said, “I came here yesterday, full of anger, hate and frustration, a person split apart, making an attempt to find all of the pieces of me in this black granite wall and put me back together.”¹¹ Depending on how we interpret “pieces,” Howard could be referring to the names as pieces—that metaphorically they are part of him, or at least part of his memory—again associating The Wall with injury and healing. Perhaps with the veterans, emotional pain is accessed through a bodily vocabulary. In her essay, “Welcome Home Brother!?: (Re)membering Masculine Identities at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial,” Margaret Laware says that, “*The Wall*, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, creates a space where it becomes possible to locate the self as Vietnam veteran, to find or create symbols that provide the self with a viable identity and an association with a larger community that is supportive and validating” (153). The Wall becomes a constructive place because it allows the veterans to reconnect with a community of veterans through reckoning with their individual Vietnam experiences.

In their article, “Public Memorializing in Postmodernity: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial as Prototype,” Carole Blair, Marsha S. Jepperson, and Enrico Pucci, Jr. say that

The structural integrity of *The Wall* unifies as a collective those who died or were listed as missing in Vietnam, but the unity disintegrates in the face of the symbolic potency of each name. *The Wall's* inscribed dialectic between individual and collective does not culminate in synthesis; it preserves reference to the veterans as individuals *and* as a group. The Memorial provides a space of recognition and acknowledges Vietnam veterans both as a group and as individuals. In so doing, it allows for legitimate commemoration even in the absence of an expressed valorization of the war effort. (278)

The Wall honors all of the Vietnam veterans by underscoring the worth of each individual through the name.

The names of the fourteen living men who are on The Wall due to Defense Department clerical errors bring up an interesting question about the relationship of the men who fought in Vietnam and the government. Perhaps to the government, the men and women listed on The Wall are only names, like lists of draftees, and it becomes fitting that their names are memorialized. The Wall, through the list of names, remembers the importance of the individual. As Lin intended, when a veteran looked for a name on The Wall, it was to emulate looking for bodies on a battlefield, and the relationship of the names to those left behind is equally poignant.

The book *In Country* by Bobbi Ann Mason is about such a journey. Though the main character is Sam A. Hughes, a girl who lost her father in the war as a baby, the pilgrimage also involves her grandmother (the mother of her dead father) and her uncle, who had served in Vietnam but survived. As she visits her father's name, Sam finds a man listed on The Wall with her own name. This strange kind of doubling makes her both a spectator and participant, and makes the name a kind of mediator between living and dead. Because she survives her father, her name is a continuation of the dead in the world of the living.

At The Wall, people of all colors, ages, and religions come together. In many cases, they end

up grieving together physically. Yet there is some question as to whether the names on The Wall democratize or privatize individuals (Gillis 19). One of the ways that individuals are re-membered at The Wall is by interacting with it through writing notes or leaving objects—many of which belonged to or refer to a name on The Wall. Many of these relate personal stories and are anonymous, which I have already mentioned is a way to speak to the dead as a way of healing.

A wide array of items are left at The Wall, including pictures, flowers, notes, army boots, poems, and medals. People are compelled to bring things and leave them there—just as they are compelled to touch the names. People give their offerings as if it is a pilgrimage site. The Museum and Archeological Regional Storage facility in Lanham, Maryland, is a 25,000-square-foot brick warehouse where the objects are numbered, catalogued, photographed, and stored according to three categories: military items, personal items, and archival material. Kristin Hass has surveyed these objects in her book *Carried to The Wall: American Memory and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial*. In it she relates a typical day of objects left at The Wall, noting that, “there are more objects than written messages. Of the written messages more are spontaneous notes than long, deliberated letters. More photographs are left than long letters. Twenty-eight kinds of things appeared more than once at *The Wall*. That eighty-five kinds of things appeared only once indicates that there is no clear consensus about the kinds of things that should be left at *The Wall*” (29). “Things” have always been important to the Vietnam veteran, even while a soldier. Tim O'Brien lists the range in his novel *The Things They Carried*, which include pictures, a lucky stone, a bible, and a girlfriend's panty hose that one soldier wore around his neck.

The objects at The Wall are fragments of memory as well as ways to preserve it—representing the dead person's life, a momentary reaction to the dead, or of the life of a survivor or passerby who constructs a memory from a visit to The Wall, a particular name, or the interpretation of objects left there. The objects and the act

of leaving them allow survivors to finally go public after so long, and allows the visitors to *The Wall* to bear witness by reading letters or responding to objects left there or spontaneously writing notes or leaving things themselves. Hass says that these objects “recast the soldiers’ identities and reestablish the veteran’s place in the culture” (93). But the objects and the act of leaving them are also for the survivors who have some relation to a name on the memorial, and for visitors who have no connection. They are a kind of declaration, making public the grief that veterans and survivors had been taught to hide. The objects are out there, up front, and although only there for one day,¹² are finally acknowledged. Viewers are forced to face declarations of anger, hurt, and pride. With these items, The Wall becomes a place for resolution or a way to unblock collective memory through personal intimacy. Hass believes that “[t]hese gifts forge a new mode of public commemoration that suggests ordinary Americans deeply crave a memory, or a thousand memories together, that speaks to ways in which this war disrupted their sense of American Culture and their place in it” (3).

Material culture is decontextualized and recontextualized at The Wall because items are left for the dead, in reference to the dead, or are of the dead, yet they hold meaning for the living. Examples include dog tags, beer, baseball cards, letters, and even a “Slim Jim,” a tool used to break into cars. Hass muses about the meaning of such an item, that it is a “valuable, hard-to-come-by tool,” but within the context of The Wall, might represent a stolen life, metaphoric unlocking of the memorial, or the habit of stealing cars shared by a visitor and name on The Wall. Hass says, “the Slim Jim helps the living to unlock, to release the dead” (100). Objects are recontextualized in relation to The Wall.

Although the things left at The Wall are poignant, perhaps more telling are the letters and notes because they indicate both the history and culture of the war and its aftermath. The following note, for instance, exhibits the diversity and camaraderie of the men who served, reading as follows:

Pablo: Me Amigo, You took my place on the ambush, I stayed behind, you died, I lived. Your spirit I’ll carry with me always, and I’ll share you with others. (4 June, 1967: KIA)
I loved you

Bob USMC¹³

The letter also reflects, as many of the notes from veterans do, survivor guilt. I could go on listing hundreds of letters that have been left, but all of them suggest that the way we remember is in fact relative. These letters also suggest that the identity of the individual is dependent upon the way in which he is remembered. These remembrances are representations of the individual and our relationship to him.

Arthur Danto wrote in *The Nation* in 1985 that “we erect monuments so that we shall always remember, and build memorials so that we shall never forget” (152). What are we not to forget—the war or the human cost of it? The memorial asks questions but gives no answers. The Vietnam trauma continues to this day, and yet revisions of history related to it in society are still played out on The Wall. Since The Wall’s dedication, names have been added to it depending on the definition over time of the Vietnam War or one’s appropriate relationship to it. The first name listed was originally Dale Buis, killed in 1959, but the name of military advisor Harry Kramer, killed in 1957, has been added. In 1983, President Reagan ordered that the names of sixty-eight Marines killed when their “Rest and Relaxation” (R ‘&’ R, or vacation) plane crashed as it was transporting them from Vietnam be added. The names of 110 military members who died of wounds received in Vietnam or outside the war zone in support of the Vietnam effort were added during April and May of 1986. There were also sculptural groups added to The Wall. Nurses protested that a statue of three men, added as a compromise to the controversy over Lin’s design, left out the female contribution to the war, so they lobbied for their own statue. Their fight to be recognized revealed that a memorial can never suit everyone, although problems were exacerbated by representational sculpture. Lin spoke of this concession as wrong:

"I am as opposed to this new addition as I was to the last," Lin concluded. "I cannot see where it will all end."¹⁴ As *The Wall* reveals trauma, it challenges memory as a knowable object. Old wounds—fear, avoidance, anger, uncertainty, guilt, shame, arrogance, and even pride—are enmeshed in memory but are so often exposed and recast at *The Wall*. The changes in the memorial reflect a mutable cultural memory.

Where will it end? One wonders, for it is not just the trauma of Vietnam but the need for everyone—regardless of the circumstances of a particular war or traumatic event—to have a memorial or a place to mourn. The Vietnam War was, as Lucy Lippard has already pointed out in an exhibition about artwork surrounding the Vietnam era and of the same title, "a different war." A different war needs a different resolution and a new vocabulary for memorialization that we find in *The Wall*. Part of the reason the Vietnam War was so traumatic is due to the unrest in the era itself and delayed trauma of its aftermath. Many veterans began calling *The Wall* "the last firebase." A firebase is an artillery position set up to give fire support to surrounding units. As Lydia Fish, author of a book entitled *The Last Firebase*, notes, "It seems a fitting name for the place where the Vietnam veterans have found the strength to fight their last and most difficult battle—the one that has enabled them to come home at last" (43).

It is effective, and perhaps necessary, to have this place to re-member Vietnam; particularly because of the Vietnam War's awkwardness in society, it seems to be the only place where some are allowed—or able—to do so. It is this marginalization that instigated Scruggs to build *The Wall*. In addition to learning from the past, the phenomenon of *The Wall* teaches us that grief is no less painful or valid regardless of the circumstances of death. *The Wall*, by remembering the individual, recognizes this. As September 11, 2001, showed us, no one owns trauma and pain; we are all connected, as an event affects each of us, and no one should have to shoulder it alone or silently. This was, ultimately, the purpose of *The Wall*. A wall, generally meant to divide, separate,

or keep people in or out, has actually brought them together.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial has become a place of discourse and dialogue. The image of Vietnam is remade there. It is the site of public events as if the backdrop of the sorrowful wall is sympathetic to contemporary trauma and suffering. Some suggest that by invoking grief instead of glory, *The Wall* is an antimonument.¹⁵ Yet it is a place where fragments of the past come together and memories are recast, or re-membered. In 1982, the former premier of South Vietnam came to touch it. Gerald Ford, in the program for the tenth anniversary of *The Wall*, wrote, "There is something very special about *The Wall*. The long tragic conflict in Vietnam was different from any military conflict in the history of America. Vast public differences on US government policy dominated the news media. It was not a typical period in America's history. *The Wall*, during its 10 years, has created a constructive sentiment of reconciliation among those diverse views" (Hass 108).

The ambiguity inherent in the minimalist form of the memorial has evoked diverse opinions about its sociological, psychological, and aesthetic function. *The Wall* truly acts as a screen. Many have pointed out, since the conception of the memorial, that what people see or do not see in *The Wall* is their own projection. As *The Wall* reveals trauma, it challenges memory as knowable object. *The Wall* has become a phenomenon because it is more than just a list of names. It is a space of spirits where the living and the dead meet, like the two wings at the apex of *The Wall*, only to go off again in different directions, like the ends of the memorial that lead off into the horizon.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial was built in response to the cultural phenomenon of the Vietnam era and its aftermath. It is a place for diverse individuals to come together and remember—or actually re-member, or reconstruct or positively redress—their experiences with Vietnam. The re-membering is instigated by a memorial that refuses treat war as anything other than an accumulation of loss and reflection of individual and collective trauma.

Maya Lin's words echo against the panels of The Wall: "I thought about what death is, what a loss it is," she remembers, "a sharp pain that lessens with time, but can never quite heal over. A scar" (Campbell 151). The Vietnam War is marked by physical, psychological, and intellectual trauma that the Vietnam Veterans Memorial makes us remember and address. Just like the names cut into the black granite, individual and collective trauma will always be present after our wounds have healed. Even as the pain lessens with time, we can never quite heal over. The scars, like the grooves of the names in the shiny surface of The Wall, remain regardless of the passing years—so that we will always re-member.

Notes

1. For almost a decade, a permanent exhibition of these items has been on view at the Smithsonian American History Museum in Washington DC.

2. These figures are noted in most discussions about the memorial, and detailed statistics are available from the National Park Service.

3. The VVMF raised nearly \$9 million to build and maintain the monument. Construction costs of The Wall totaled approximately \$4,284,000.

4. As noted in the latter part of this article, this figure has changed several times. Currently there are 58,226 names of men and women listed on the memorial.

5. After I had completed this article, I became aware that Casey Nelson Blake made similar statements about the memorial in "Mourning and Modernism After 9/11," *The Nation* 275:9 (September 23, 2002): 40-49.

6. These comments are referenced in numerous articles and books and derive from original debates about the memorial through letters to the editor and articles such as Robert Doubek and James J. Kilpatrick, letters to the *National Review* (October 16, 1981): 1170-72, Tom Wolfe, "Art Disputes War," *Washington Post* (October 13, 1982): B4, and "Stop That Monument," *National Review* (September 18, 1981): 1064.

7. Dimensions and statistical information can be found at the National Park Service Web site for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial: <http://www.nps.gov/vive/>.

8. Panel 1E first listed the earliest death as Dale Buis, one of the first advisors in Vietnam, killed on July 8, 1959, but that has since been changed to include the 1957 death of military advisor Harry Kramer. Panel 70W lists the last death as Richard Vande Geer, one of four men killed on USS Mayaguez on May 15, 1975.

9. I have overheard such comments during my visits to The Wall.

10. I refer to the individual as a "man" or "him" because all but eight names listed are male.

11. "Letter to My Brothers," was originally written Howard Feldman, on November 11, 1984, and left at the Vietnam Veterans

Memorial on November 10, 1992. Reprinted in Margaret R. Laware, "Welcome Home Brother!": (Re)membering Masculine Identities at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial," *Voices in the Street: Explorations in Gender, Media, and Public Space*, ed. Susan Drucker and Gary Gumpert, p. 153.

12. The objects are picked up by National Park Service employees by every evening at midnight and cataloged for that day.

13. This is one of many quotes located in Thomas F. Morrissey, *Between the Lines: Photographs from the National Vietnam Veterans Memorial*.

14. From the Minutes of the Commission of Fine Arts, October 22, 1987, pages 5-90, as summarized in Karal Ann Marling and John Wetenhall, "The Sexual Politics of Memory: The Vietnam Women's Memorial Project and 'The Wall.'"

15. See Marita Sturken, "The Wall, The Screen and the Image: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial," in *A Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff.

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