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Stefania Ciocia

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of *Heart of Darkness*

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STEFANIA CIOCIA

## Conradian Echoes in Vietnam War Literature: Tim O'Brien's Rewriting of *Heart of Darkness* in 'Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong'

Vietnam was full of strange stories, some improbable, some well beyond that, but the stories that will last forever are those that swirl back and forth across the border between trivia and bedlam, the mad and the mundane. This one keeps returning to me...

Tim O'Brien, 'Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong'

...we knew we were fated, before the ebb began to run, to hear about one of Marlow's inconclusive experiences.

Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*

The epigraph to Mark Baker's *Nam: The Vietnam War in the Words of the Men and Women Who Fought There* (1981) reads: 'You want to hear a genuine war story? I only understand Vietnam as though it were a story. It's not like it happened to me.' It is no surprise that a collection of oral testimonies, otherwise introduced as an earnest attempt to 'bring us closer to the truth than we have come so far' (Baker, xv), should be prefaced by an immediate disclaimer of the notion of factual truth and an affirmation of the need for literary license if one is to begin to make some sense out of the experience of war. Meaning can only be accessible to the narrator-witness if he disassociates himself from his immediate knowledge of Vietnam: paradoxically, the genuineness of a personal account can only be attained through a creative, fictional re-elaboration of the storyteller's first-hand experience of the conflict. The inexplicable nature of Vietnam, in its dual identification with an alien land and with a harrowing military enterprise, goes perhaps some way towards casting light on its unmanageable yet compelling status as a subject for storytelling, or indeed for linguistic definition. In country; Indian country; The

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boonies; Fantasyland; Disneyland; The Nam. The soldiers' slang finds inspiration in a crescendo of binary oppositions, in which the contrast between civilization and wilderness is superseded by the dichotomy between the real and the surreal (or even the non-real). Larger than life, given gravity and substance by the presence of the determinate article, 'The Nam' is variously renamed as a savage, inimical land, a sort of parallel, self-contained universe where the rules of reality do not apply: 'Vietnam was written off as a place too incomprehensible to exist. People did not go home. They "went back to the world"' (Beidler, 1982, 6). Beyond the reach of language, Vietnam becomes an experience which ultimately transcends its materiality to become 'a state of mind' (Oliver Stone, quoted in Herzog, 1992, 1), a by-word for a psychological condition, as well as for the most private and unfathomable recess of human nature.

The metaphor of the physical journey as an exploration of the meandering of one's consciousness, probably as old as storytelling itself, is thus an accurate reflection of the soldiers' metamorphosis in response to their experience of war in an unfamiliar country, whose cultural makeup and natural environment were often perceived as both hostile and impenetrable. The radical alterity of Vietnam compounds the displacement of the romantic expectations—the dreams of heroism and courage—that traditionally underlie the military ethos: 'the realities and ironies of combat forever destroy [the soldiers'] naïveté and lead them to crucial insights about human nature and war. Some soldiers submit to this spiritual and psychological journey; others resist as they hold on to civilization's trappings, saving illusions, or surface details' (Herzog, 1992, 4). Soldiers are therefore subject to a double threat of alienation, from their physical surroundings and from the ideology that seemingly validates their actions: it is a well-documented fact that the fighting in Vietnam put to the test not merely the soldiers' physical and mental capacity for survival, but their entire belief system, once the often indiscriminate violence of the conflict began to warp the image of America as a 'redeemer nation' (Hellman, 6), a self-perception that was meant to provide the moral coordinates and the ultimate justification for the U.S. military engagement in South-East Asia.<sup>1</sup> In this way, the American confrontation with Vietnam can be seen to involve a geographical and an existential journey that, in its turn, triggers a critique of western ideology.

The complexity of a similar scenario is masterfully captured in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, whose account of Marlow's progress upriver in the Congo and Kurtz's surrender to the 'fascination of the abomination' is an apt, established precursor for the challenges, and the charm, of the