

Postcolonial Trauma in
David Bergen's *The Time in Between*
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Abstract: Studies of postcolonial trauma investigate Cathy Caruth's contention that traumatic psychopathology, by virtue of its universality, can bridge cultural difference. David Bergen's *The Time in Between* tests this theory in relation to the Vietnam War. Bergen's novel recognizes trauma as an effective, though limited, vehicle of cultural reconciliation that ultimately needs to be supplemented by further discursive resistance. Although the novel's treatment of trauma resists Orientalist representations of Vietnam, forms of parallelism point to tacit cultural fissures, which are countered through narrative self-reflexivity and the frustration of what Edward Said terms the "exteriority of representation."

Keywords: trauma; postcolonialism; Vietnam War; Canadian literature; David Bergen

In her study of postcolonial trauma, Victoria Burrows investigates and often contests Cathy Caruth's contention that traumatic psychopathology, by virtue of its universality, can both bridge cultural difference and challenge culturally determined hierarchies of power. Burrows addresses Caruth's assertion that "psychoanalysis, psychiatry, sociology, and even literature are beginning to hear each other anew in the study of trauma . . . [by] listening through the radical disruption and gaps of traumatic experience" ("Introduction," *American 2*), contending "such a statement manifestly ignores power structures" (163). For Burrows, the negotiation between trauma and postcolonial politics is difficult:

Amalgamating trauma theory and postcolonialism is not, therefore, just about individual traumatic experiences not

being assimilated at the time of the occurrence. The synthesis is complicated by cultural imbalances that are bound by issues of psychic and material domination inherent in ethnocentrism and the invisible power structures of whiteness. (164)

In effect, Burrows' skepticism encourages us to question Caruth's later assertion that trauma "may provide the very link between cultures" ("Trauma" 11). This essay tests the capacity of trauma as a mental wound¹ to negotiate cultural difference and equalize power hierarchies within a specific colonial context, namely the Vietnam War, particularly as it is depicted in David Bergen's 2005 Giller Prize-winning novel *The Time in Between*.² Various critics, such as Kalí Tal, Robert Jay Lifton, and Judith Herman, have located Vietnam literature within discourses of trauma; indeed, the Vietnam War is intrinsic to the development of trauma theory in the late twentieth century (Herman 27).³ However, as Renny Christopher argues, the debilitating power dynamics inherent in colonial relationships were also an element of the Vietnam War. This intersection between trauma and colonial relationships in the Vietnam War is also apparent in *The Time in Between*, and therefore, an analysis of the novel offers a useful forum of investigation that ascertains the degree to which trauma can erode cultural differences between victims. In other words, this essay engages in the kind of postcolonial study of trauma Burrows describes but does so by examining how *The Time in Between* represents trauma as able—or unable—to bridge cultural difference between sufferers, most particularly those who have internalized an ideological apparatus that is informed by colonial relationships and power structures.⁴

In its treatment of postcolonial trauma in Vietnam, Bergen's *The Time in Between* represents trauma as an effective, though limited, vehicle of cultural reconciliation that ultimately needs to be supplemented and potentially qualified by various forms of discursive resistance. On the one hand, rather than solely interpreting trauma as a deadly effect of the conflict between the United States and Vietnam, Bergen's work gives credence to Caruth's suggestion that trauma "may provide the . . . link between cultures," at least to some degree (11). Orientalist abstractions,

which Christopher argues are typical of Western postwar depictions of Vietnam (300), are revised in the novel through representations of the traumatic nightmare, a symptom of trauma that reveals similarities rather than differences between U.S. and Vietnamese soldiers and, by extension, lays the foundation for a cultural appreciation of Vietnam beyond Orientalist discourses. Representations of the traumatic nightmare in the novel interrogate two of its features, namely, the capacity of the nightmare to distort linear conceptions of time and its reliance on Gothic aesthetics, which usually encode problematic racial stereotypes. The novel, thus, reveals that U.S. and Vietnamese ex-soldiers suffering from traumatic nightmares experience time as a distortion and view the scenic aspects of trauma as generally devoid of racially encoded Gothic aesthetics.

However, Bergen's novel cannot be read as an absolute vindication of trauma as a vehicle of cultural reconciliation. As suggested, the novel's treatment of trauma can be interpreted as adhering to what Christopher has termed a "new movement" in Vietnam War narratives, whereby the Vietnamese enemy is humanized (297), particularly as traumatized subject. However, this emphasis on the human universality of traumatic experience risks ignoring important political differences. *The Time in Between* avoids apolitical humanism by presenting complex modes of political understanding. Specifically, forms of parallelism, although indicative of intercultural awareness, also signify cultural alienation. In addition, the novel is self-reflexive about the need for political engagement in the face of individual psychopathology. Furthermore, it exposes the persistence of racial stereotypes held by Westerners in contemporary Vietnam and undermines their authority by disallowing what Edward Said terms the "exteriority of representation" (21), especially through the use of strategic aporia where Orientalist discourses traditionally prevail. In effect, by studying Bergen's novel through the lens of trauma theory and postcolonial politics, this essay reveals the extent to which the psychopathology of trauma can reconcile cultural ruptures and address power imbalances. Although the traumatic nightmare as a symptom of trauma allows for cultural reconciliation, it does so only to a degree. *The Time in Between* recognizes the need for alternative modes of political awareness and thereby complicates any absolute or simplistic

application of Caruth's assertion that trauma "may provide the . . . link between cultures," particularly in a postcolonial context.

Reconsidering Orientalist Abstractions: The Traumatic Nightmare

The traumatic nightmare can be interpreted as a vehicle of cross-cultural understanding in Bergen's work, especially in its capacity to complicate traditional depictions of the Vietnamese soldier. Postwar representations of the Vietnamese are typically marked by omissions and abstractions. David Desser's essay "Charlie Don't Surf" observes that "what is striking about the rhetoric of the post-Vietnam era across political boundaries is the absence of the Vietnamese in the Vietnam War" (85). Keith Beattie has recognized a similar tendency, particularly in archetypal cinematic texts such as Oliver Stone's semi-autobiographical 1986 film *Platoon*. The Vietnamese population is not only omitted, but the very national context of the war is effaced by the closing sentiments of the central protagonist Chris Taylor. Reflecting on the conflict between his platoon's opposing camps, Taylor concludes that "we did not fight the enemy, we fought ourselves; and the enemy was us." This final voice-over, Beattie argues, suggests that the greatest obstacle to peace is American disunity (89). Vietnam and the Vietnamese are entirely disregarded, whereby the war is reduced to an allegory of American disunity, so that we witness a curious foregrounding of the American Civil War (89). The iconic Vietnam veteran is, then, what Lauren Berlant has called the "model American citizen," a normative portrait of purportedly representative whiteness (21). When the Vietnamese are depicted, Christopher contends that they are rendered as abstractions founded on Orientalist discourses. John Kleinen reaches a similar conclusion, acknowledging that "while the themes changed from general war movies, through the depiction of bloodthirsty veterans and patriots towards the view of the victimized service men, the representations of the Vietnamese did not change dramatically. Vietnamese soldiers and civilians are portrayed as cunning, cruel, sadistic, ambivalent and irresponsible" (433). Edward Miller and Tuong Vu formulate a similar response in their analysis of historical scholarship on the Vietnam War: "This scholarship focused overwhelmingly on American sources and the American dimensions of war—that

is, on issues having to do with American actions and American motives. Vietnamese and other non-American actors typically played only marginal roles in these accounts" (1). However, they go on to recognize that from the 1990s "growing numbers of scholars have expressed dissatisfaction with the old American-centered approaches" (2). Calling for the "Vietnamization of Vietnam War Studies" (2), these critics acknowledge how approaches to the Vietnam War are beginning to draw on "broader intellectual and interpretive currents" (5). If framed within the context of literature, this interpretive strategy can also be applied to Bergen's novel: *The Time in Between* revisits these elisions and Orientalist abstractions, particularly through representations of the traumatic nightmare. It is a symptom of trauma that not only highlights the plight of the Vietnamese but also reveals similarities rather than differences between U.S. and Vietnamese soldiers and, by extension, lays the foundation for a cultural appreciation of Vietnam beyond Orientalist distortion.

In keeping with the psychopathology of trauma, traumatic nightmares mark Charles Boatman, an American ex-soldier (Bergen 38, 47, 54, 78–9, 103, 136, 151); Huang Vu, a South Vietnamese ex-fighter (222); and Kiet, a North Vietnamese ex-combatant (86). The novel is structured in two parts, and its first part focuses on the experiences of Charles Boatman, an American Vietnam veteran struggling with the symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in British Columbia. In an effort to resolve the debilitating psychological and emotional effects of the war, Boatman returns to Vietnam only to disappear. The second part of the novel occurs immediately after the discovery of Charles' body, which resolves his disappearance as suicide. This second part contends with the response of Charles' daughter, Ada, to his death and her romantic relationship with Huang Vu, a South Vietnamese artist who also suffers from trauma as a result of the war. The novel is also composed of two diegeses. The primary diegesis is the world of Charles, his family, and Huang Vu in the past and present in both Canada and Vietnam. The metadiegetic narrative is *In a Dark Wood*. Charles reads *In a Dark Wood* by the author Dang Tho in the narrative's diegesis; however, its events, which relate the story of Kiet, a North Vietnamese soldier struggling with the war, are a distinct, metadiegetic level of narration.

As sufferers of traumatic nightmares, all ex-combatants, American, South Vietnamese, and North Vietnamese, experience a distortion of linear time. Psychoanalysts (for the most part) agree that what defines trauma as a mental wound is the very fact that “the event is not assimilated” in the conscious mind “or experienced fully at the time” (Caruth 4). The event is undergone too soon or too unexpectedly to be fully known the moment it occurs and so is accessed “only belatedly in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it” (4; emphasis in original). Victims are, therefore, haunted by an image or event that occurs in the past but is not known *as* past. Out of its place and time, the past event of trauma intrudes into the present and is recognized as the present. Allan Young has aptly characterized trauma as the “disease of time,” for its sufferers exist in a liminal state, a time in between past and present that cannot be understood in terms of a linear sequence (7). This description of time explains the novel’s title. The time in between is time as experienced in the state of traumatic nightmare; it is the time in between past trauma and present experience. The novel reveals the imposition of past traumas as present events in its references to Charles Boatman. Years after returning from Vietnam, Charles moves from the United States to Sumas Mountain, British Columbia, having left his wife and children. He lives in isolation for six months until his wife is killed in a motorcycle accident (29). He is, thus, compelled to raise his three children—the twins, Jon and Del, and his daughter, Ada—as a single parent, an eventuality that triggers his traumatic memories: “Charles suffered a panic that brought him back to the hills surrounding the harbor of Danang” (29). The imposition of these memories and their distortion of linear time are particularly apparent when he relates his past narratives of the war to his children; present tense verbs reveal that Charles experiences his traumatic past as immediate present: “‘They’re coming,’ he’d whisper, and one time when Del spoke, he clamped his hand over her mouth and put his lips to her ear and whispered, ‘Don’t’” (38). Unable to distinguish between his past in Vietnam and present in Canada, Charles exists in a liminal space between the two.

The narrative also enacts the tendency of the nightmare to disrupt linear time. Rather than unfolding in a linear sequence, which would

suggest continuity and chronology, the narrative consistently shifts levels and tenses. There are various narrative levels in the novel: Ada's diegetic present in Vietnam, Charles' diegetic past in wartime Vietnam and present in postwar Vietnam, and Keit's metadiegetic past tense narrative in *In a Dark Wood*. Because the novel shifts from one narrative level and its particular tense to another, at times unexpectedly, there is no clear sense of linear chronology. The narrative, then, performs the effects of the temporal confusion brought about by trauma. Charles' pilgrimage to Vietnam can be read as an attempt to reinstate linear time, particularly by generating closure and thereby temporal cohesion. We are told:

He said that he imagined coming back to this place and solving some mystery, that then he would understand what had happened to him. But it was not the same place. . . . He said that he had gone back to some of the places where terrible acts had taken place and all he had found was grass and fields and dirt roads and young children tugging at his pants and small hands pulling at him. Nothing made sense. (168)

Charles returns to Vietnam expecting to find the war and the experiences that scarred him an ongoing reality. However, he concedes, "it was not the same place." "Nothing made sense" because Charles' view of time is distorted. He expects to enter the past as war-torn Vietnam upon arriving to contemporary Vietnam because he continues to live this past reality in the present. By returning to Vietnam and his presumed past reality, Charles hopes to resolve finally "what happened to him." However, this clarity and the reinstatement of linear time that would accompany it do not come to fruition, and so he remains confused. Not surprisingly, then, Charles becomes disillusioned with time, knowing its sinister dimensions: "He said that only recently had he become aware of the mercilessness of time, of its cruel push" (149). One could argue that time's "cruel push" is not simply a push into the future and, by extension, the push of aging. For Charles, the "cruel push" is as much a push into the past, a past that refuses to be known as past and unremittingly imposes itself into the present.

This restructuring of time is also experienced by Vietnamese survivors of the war. Huang Vu recognizes that the traumatic nightmare changes the very structure of time, so that rather than unfolding in chronological order, it occurs in layers: “He said that time climbed upward in layers and that with each consecutive layer the past became buried” (215). Huang Vu’s description of time is reminiscent of Walter Benjamin’s discussion of the Angel of History in his ninth thesis from “Theses on the Philosophy of History”: “Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet” (257–58). Both Benjamin’s angel and Huang Vu recognize that the past is not, in fact, a linear sequence, although we perceive it as such. According to Benjamin, this “chain of events” is often confused as progress. During Benjamin’s World War Two experiences, progress manifested as a military machine and fascism. In effect, for Benjamin, history is not linear or progressive but a stagnant, petrified construction that heaps devastation and error upon devastation and error. Similarly, Huang Vu recognizes that history holds a vertical trajectory that keeps it fixed and seemingly unreachable, buried in detritus. For Huang Vu, whose comments are informed by the context of Vietnam, which like Benjamin’s Europe of the early twentieth century had been devastated by several wars, time points to a series of ongoing catastrophes. However, the material reality of these catastrophes not only calls for a model of time and history beyond linear constructions, but the traumatic memory of these events as it appears in nightmares also disallows an understanding of the enormity of Huang Vu’s experiences in Vietnam, so he is forced to bury them in his consciousness. Both Charles Boatman and Huang Vu recognize the capacity of the traumatic nightmare to pervert linear chronology and evade comprehension. Their shared experience suggests a level of cultural reconciliation or, in Caruth’s terminology, a “link between cultures”; rather than depicting the Vietnamese experience of the war as an absence or an abstraction, the novel humanizes the Vietnamese soldier, revealing that he, like the American veteran, is vulnerable to the psychopathology of trauma.

The novel’s treatment of the Gothic aesthetics inherent in traumatic nightmares also encourages cultural empathy and understanding.

Steven Bruhm has recognized general connections between the Gothic and trauma:

Through trauma . . . we can best understand the contemporary Gothic and why we crave it. . . . The Gothic itself is a narrative of trauma. Its protagonists usually experience some horrifying event that profoundly affects them, destroying (at least temporarily) the norms that structure their lives and identities. Images of haunting, destruction and death . . . all define a Gothic aesthetic that is quite close to Cathy Caruth's definition of trauma. (268)

In *Trauma and Dreams*, Deirdre Barrett compiles a series of Vietnam War veterans' traumatic nightmares; their content suggests that they too are inherently characterized by Gothic aesthetics, such as images of ghosts, corpses, decapitations, evil, and the monstrous. As Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert recognizes, these kinds of Gothic representations do not simply horrify; they are often highly racial constructions, particularly in colonial literature, which designate the "colonial subject . . . as the personification of evil" (231). Amanda Howell also observes this tendency in her study of "Nam Gothic," where Gothic depictions of Vietnamese soldiers as evil serve to designate their cultural inferiority (230). In Vietnam War narratives, the Gothic connotes a racialized "other" as inferior and does so for the same purposes of justifying an imperialistic practice—in this case the war.

The novel gestures to the Gothic in its use of grotesque imagery; however, despite these allusions, it simultaneously departs from the tradition of the Gothic as signifier of the inferior colonial "other," particularly in its representation of the traumatic nightmare. Charles' nightmares are charged with grotesque allusions: he "would see images of both fantastic beauty and dire malevolence. . . . He saw a mouth opening in a scream and insects erupting from a dark maw. He saw stumps for legs and a boy's eyes" (39–40). Although grotesque, these scenic aspects of trauma are generally devoid of racially inscribed Gothic imagery. This absence of Gothic stylistics is particularly apparent when Charles finally narrates his testimony in his dying letter:

He shot a young boy. The boy was standing in the doorway of a hut and he shot him. That's what he did. He wrote that he couldn't tell them anything different because there was nothing different to tell. He said that he saw right away that it was a young boy and not a soldier. . . . He said that after the shooting stopped—and there had been other innocent people killed by other soldiers—they chased the remaining villagers out into the fields and called in an air strike. And everything disappeared. The boy that he had shot. The old woman that someone else had shot. All of that disappeared. Only it didn't. (169)

The rendering relies on stock, unsentimental realism as opposed to encoded racial slurs. Charles' victims are "people," a "boy," and the "old woman"; as Charles himself puts it, these war narratives are generally presented in "a matter-of-fact" way (116).

The only prominent suggestion of the Gothic in the novel is the reference to ghosts; however, the novel also empties the ghost of the problematic power dynamics traditionally apparent in the Gothic. Using Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*, Jerrold Hogle has argued that the ghosts in Gothic fiction are instances of the abject and products of abjection (498). Kristeva derives the term abject from its literal meaning: throwing off or being thrown under. What we throw off, she suggests, is all that is in between and ambiguous, the fundamental inconsistencies that prevent us from declaring a coherent and independent identity (2). Whatever threatens us with anything like this betwixt and between condition, Kristeva concludes, is what we throw off or abject into defamiliarized manifestations (4). In Gothic fiction, they are the ghosts and monstrous counterparts that haunt protagonists; often, they signify racialized "others" who cannot be incorporated into white, Western normalcy. As Hogle explains: "the most multifarious, inconsistent and conflicted aspects of our beings in the West are 'thrown off' onto seemingly repulsive monsters or ghosts that both conceal and reveal this 'otherness' from our preferred selves" (498). However, in Bergen's novel, the ghost is bereft of its Gothic implications in two ways. First, an American soldier identifies with the plight of a North Vietnamese combatant, and

so rather than figuring him as a racialized abstraction in the form of a ghost, he associates his status as spectre with trauma and loss. Second, the novel offers a differing definition of the ghost beyond the Gothic, approaching it in the context of Vietnamese narratives that have a more literal response to the figure of the ghost.

In part, images of ghosts in Bergen's novel indicate that an American soldier identifies with the experiences of a North Vietnamese combatant. At times, when there are suggestions of the Gothic, particularly the image of the Asian "ghost," they are initially charged with allusions to Orientalist abstractions, such as the "invisible Asian," a frightening soldier who is modeled on the "sinister Asian." As Charles explains to his children, "most of the time there was emptiness, a great field of nothing. Nothing but ghosts" (38). However, these images are also reconfigured in the novel to suggest personal alienation and the spectre of trauma that affects both American and Vietnamese soldiers. This reconceptualization occurs when Charles reads Kiet's narrative in *In a Dark Wood* and recognizes that he is not a sinister, invisible enemy but the ghost of a man who has been battered by the trauma of war: "The fact was Kiet was a creation, a ghost wandering north towards Hanoi. Charles was intrigued by the author of the novel, by his brooding photograph and the sadness that seemed to hover behind or above him" (97). The enemy is humanized, and his ghostly status alludes to issues of personal trauma, loss, and his role as a fictive spectre of the author. Although when later robbed in contemporary Vietnam, Charles continues to rely on the term "ghost" to suggest the sinister implications of the Asian enemy—"In the darkness the man was a black ghost, and it came to Charles, in the haze of his drunkenness, that he was going to die"—the novel does not allow the designation to maintain its racialized connotations, as the man is immediately rendered innocuous, stumbling, falling, and fleeing from the scene (135). In effect, rather than defining Kiet and the thief as racialized "others" in the form of ghosts, the novel approaches them in complex ways by acknowledging their vulnerability.

Bergen's work further complicates the ghost by alluding to its implications within a Vietnamese cultural context. After Charles has

died and Ada begins to have a romantic relationship with Huang Vu, he concedes that his nightmares are also characterized by images of ghosts: “I still suffered from nightmares. On the nights I was home, my wife shook me awake and asked me who I was talking about. I had been calling out various names, and they were the names of my dead friends. I dreamed about ghosts and dead women” (222). Here, ghosts represent manifestations of friends lost in battle, South Vietnamese soldiers sacrificed in war as opposed to loaded racial signifiers. Indeed, Bergen’s use of the term in the context of Huang Vu’s plight gestures to Bao Ninh’s treatment of the ghost in *The Sorrow of War*. Bergen’s writing of the novel was encouraged by his reading of *The Sorrow of War* by Vietnamese writer Bao Ninh (Walker). Ninh’s narrative is set in North Vietnam in 1975 and has been specifically identified by critics David Miller and Tuang Vu as a Vietnamese source about the Vietnam War that challenges American-centered responses: “Since the 1990s, the increased interest in Vietnamese sources and the determination to develop new methods and conceptual frameworks have often reinforced each other. How is one to make sense of *The Sorrow of War*, the searing novel by DRV war veteran Bao Ninh, if one sees the Vietnam War only as ‘an American ordeal’ (as one American textbook author would have it?)” (5). Bergen’s novel inscribes *The Sorrow of War* as an intertext that reveals the experiences of a North Vietnamese soldier named Kien before, during, and after the war; however, *The Sorrow of War* takes fictionalized form in Bergen’s work, renamed *In a Dark Wood* and written by the fictional author Dang Tho who relates his experiences through the fictional protagonist Kiet (80). In Ninh’s *The Sorrow of War*, the ghost takes on literal figuration, signifying the real spectres of lost soldiers. In this passage from *The Sorrow of War*, Kien describes the result of the battle that annihilated his battalion, which only he survived:

After that battle no one mentioned the 27th Battalion any more, though numerous souls of ghosts and devils were born in that deadly defeat. They were still loose, wandering in every corner and bush in the jungle, drifting along the stream, refus-

ing to depart for the Other World. From then on it was called the Jungle of Screaming Souls. Just hearing the name whispered was enough to send chills down the spine. Perhaps the screaming souls gathered together on special festival days as members of the Lost Battalion, lining up in the little diamond-shaped clearing, checking their ranks and numbers. The sobbing whispers were heard deep in the jungle at night, the howls carried on the wind. Perhaps they really were the voices of the wandering souls of dead soldiers. (6)

Although he initially adheres to a figurative understanding of the ghost, Kien in *The Sorrow of War* ultimately literalizes the metaphor. Huang Vu in *The Time in Between* may not suffer literal contact with ghosts like Kien, but he nevertheless “dreams about ghosts” who are the remnants of friends lost in battle. This shift in representation, whereby the ghost is no longer racial “other” but a literal or figurative incarnation of soldiers who have perished in battle, empties the ghost of its Gothic implications. By doing so, the novel allows for a more inclusive vision of the war as a shared cultural experience, which is predicated on a vision of loss rather than racially encoded notions of difference.

Beyond Apolitical Humanism: Parallelism, Self-reflexivity, and Aporia

Even though the psychopathology of trauma, particularly the traumatic nightmare, has universal dimensions for sufferers, thus allowing it to bridge cultural difference in the ways Caruth suggests, the concept that trauma is a “link between cultures” (11) is not simplistically mobilized in *The Time in Between*; Bergen's novel also reveals how trauma can represent cultural division. As suggested, the traumatic nightmare engenders a degree of cultural reconciliation, a dimension of the novel that is reinforced by forms of parallelism. The novel is founded on a parallel structure, whereby the experiences of American soldier Charles in the novel's diegesis are paralleled in those of Kiet, a North Vietnamese combatant who has deserted in the metadiegetic narrative *In a Dark Wood*.

The most markedly horrifying dimension of Kiet's narrative occurs when he is threatened with discovery by "three men from the village," and hearing a baby's cry, he slits the baby's throat (84). Later, Kiet kills a pig in order to fend off starvation (87). These central traumatic episodes mirror those of Charles Boatman, who like Kiet murders a child and kills a pig and a dog (45). It is no wonder, then, that Charles, upon reading the narrative, feels a marked connection with the plight of this Vietnamese soldier, whose experiences echo his own: "He would not have been able to explain, to anyone who asked, why this particular story had moved him, but he felt a kinship with something" (97). As Charles' name suggests, "Charlie" is no longer an absent enemy but a manifestation of himself. His surname, "Boatman," reinforces this identification by alluding to the Vietnamese "boat people," refugees who fled the postwar communist state and have become, according to Chih-ming Wang, "the most prominent representation of the Vietnamese diaspora" (161). Typically, these representations rely on reductive constructions, such as the "successful, assimilated, and anticommunist newcomers to the American 'melting pot,'" whom Yen Le Espiritu argues serve to position the United States as superior "rescuer" (329). By aligning the loaded trope of the Vietnamese "boat people" with Charles "Boatman," the novel defamiliarizes these problematic constructions and reveals a commonality of experience between the American veteran and the Vietnamese refugee.

Despite these similarities, the novel adds to the complexity of the characters' trauma by also turning it into a force of alienation, which is revealed through alternative forms of parallelism. The link established in the novel between Charles Boatman and the author Dang Tho is another seeming manifestation of cultural reconciliation through shared traumatic experience. However, despite this identification on the part of Charles, no real, mutual connection through meeting is ever made; Charles never locates Dang Tho and only knows him as a fictive construction. Dang Tho is ultimately a pervasive absence. Perhaps Charles' suicide is an effort to replicate that same level of absence, and so it signifies a fundamental connection between the men, both recognizing erasure as the only real remedy for trauma. However, fundamental dif-

ferences persist. Dang Tho harnesses trauma to create art in the form of *In a Dark Wood*, while Charles ultimately succumbs to trauma in a self-destructive act of annihilation. Charles' resulting loss of his eyes is significant: Charles fails to see beyond his pain, unlike Dang Tho who at least can envision art from his. Although suicide and unresolved grief are recurring themes in Bergen's fiction, such as *A Year of Lesser* (1996), *See the Child* (1999), and *The Case of Lena S* (2002), in *The Time in Between* they are further developed to reveal cultural distinctions. Even though both Charles and Dang Tho seek reconciliation, fundamental differences in their experience of trauma remain. Bergen, thus, does not oversimplify trauma, using it only as a means to overcome cultural difference. Instead, through forms of parallelism, he adds to the complexity of the characters' trauma by also turning it into a force of alienation.

In effect, although the novel can be interpreted as part of what Christopher has identified as a "new movement" in Vietnam War narratives, whereby the Vietnamese enemy is reconfigured beyond a series of racist abstractions and is humanized as traumatized subject, *The Time in Between* does not risk lapsing into apolitical humanism (297). As postmodern theorists such as Linda Hutcheon have recognized, "the humanist notion of the unitary and autonomous subject" has been questioned in late-twentieth-century thought, revealing that "neither man nor woman is an autonomous, coherent free agent; neither can be separated from cultural systems" (159). Bergen's novel is self-reflexive about this need for culturally contextualized political engagement, particularly in the face of humanist individualism. In Howell's assessment of Vietnam War narratives, she recognizes that they often "reduce the historical and political specificity of Vietnam to a matter of individual psychological disturbance" (230). Rather than contextualizing the war within its political history, these narratives lapse into apolitical individualism that explores the psychological effects of the war, particularly their impact on the rites of passage into masculinity. Bergen's novel, however, does not elide the collective and political dimensions of the war despite its intercultural vision based on individual psychopathology. At one point, Phan Quoc, a member of the writers' association, assesses Dang Tho, the author of *In a Dark Wood*:

My feelings are that Dang Tho is perhaps a talented writer but he did not represent the reality of the war. People died but not in the depressing way that is shown in the novel. The war was very long and the cost was great. Three million people were killed. There are thirty thousand Vietnamese missing in action. Two million people were wounded. One million women became widows. Millions of mothers lost their sons. Five large cities were thoroughly destroyed. (253)

In its critique of Dang Tho's novel, Bergen's work also self-reflexively draws attention to its own omissions. By focusing on individual psychological trauma, Bergen's novel, like Dang Tho's, risks effacing the collective dimensions of the war and their impact on the Vietnamese community. Dang Tho's novel is further critiqued because it does not consider the political context of the war: "*The sorrow of war* depicted in Dang Tho's book is right. Of course, we see that sorrow. However, the writer didn't show the reasons why the sorrow took place. It was Americans who invaded Vietnam. It was not our desire to fight" (253–54; emphasis added). Bergen's use of the phrase "sorrow of war" here is a self-reflexive allusion to the text on which the metadiegetic narrative *In a Dark Wood* is based, namely Bao Ninh's *The Sorrow of War*. This critique of Dang Tho's novel *In a Dark Wood* as inherently apolitical and devoid of accountability also extends to Ninh's *The Sorrow of War*. As the intertext on which Bergen's novel is founded, this nod to Ninh's work is also a self-conscious critique of Bergen's own text. Political context and accountability, Bergen's work suggests, are necessary coefficients to detailed accounts of personal suffering, even in *The Time in Between*. A difficult balance needs to be struck between personal pain, cultural sensitivity, collective repercussions, and political awareness.

The political vision of *The Time in Between* is further refined through its recognition of persistent racial stereotypes held by Westerners in contemporary Vietnam. Rather than simply acknowledging the existence of these Western constructions, Bergen's work simultaneously undermines their authority by disallowing what Said terms the "exteriority of representation" (21).⁵ Said argues that Orientalism depends on a strat-

egy of representation premised on exteriority: "that is, on the fact that the Orientalist, poet or scholar, makes the Orient speak, describes the Orient, renders its mysteries plain and to the West. He is never concerned with the Orient except as the first cause of what he says" (21). In part, the novel reveals the ways in which the exteriority of representation is an integral element of contemporary representations of Vietnam. Stereotypical Oriental constructs are apparent from the outset to the novel's close, rendered in part through the figure of Yen, a fourteen-year-old Vietnamese boy, who adheres to depictions of the cunning, sinister, highly sexualized Oriental. These manifestations culminate in Ada physically abusing Yen after she discovers him "holding her underwear and whispering to himself" in her hotel room (270). However, the Western imposition of racialized meaning does not ultimately hold. Bergen refutes constructions of Yen as the lazy, greedy Oriental: "[Ada] asked him if he was looking for money. 'No. I am not a beggar. I earn my money'" (10). Indeed, Yen does not receive payment in the entire novel. Although repellent to the reader, Yen's behaviour, motives, and character ultimately elude Western comprehension. As he contends in his final assertion in the novel, "You don't understand, Miss Ada. You don't understand my sadness" (271). What remains is an aporia, a point of undecidability in the form of negative Western constructions of Yen and Yen's insistence that his life is beyond Western comprehension.⁶ The vacuum of meaning that is in turn created around the character of Yen is a void that supplants the exteriority of representation and with it the imposition of limiting Western discourses.

This opacity is also apparent in renderings of Lieutenant Dat. In part, he embodies the stereotype of the effeminate Oriental. Jon's assessment of Dat suggests this reductive construction: "He has beautiful hands. His wrists are thin and the nail on his little finger is long" (6). Although Jon's view of Dat is filtered through a homoerotic gaze, Dat remains an effeminized object of desire. The stereotype of the sinister Asian is also apparent in renderings of Dat. Ada "hated this man with his officious and oily demeanor," and Jon observes that "this Dat isn't a real policeman. He just smiles at us" (56). Ada and Jon "didn't understand" the policies of Dat and the Vietnamese police force in general, and they

ultimately relegate him to marginal status (56). In characterizing Dat through the siblings' eyes, the novel exhibits the imposition of Western meaning that traditionally obstructs the Orient from its own meaning-making processes. However, this reductive vision is countered through the voice of the Orient in the form of Dat, who destabilizes any uniform, simplistic construction imposed by the West: "You are sometimes rude, Miss Ada. You think you are always right, or that I am perhaps stupid, or that I am a smaller person because I am not as rich as you. This is false. You must not assume to know me" (57). Again, Bergen does not overtly champion Vietnam or the Orient. He reveals the limitations of Western discourse to render the Vietnamese characters by investing them with an undisclosed complexity. The nuances of Dat's character remain unrevealed precisely because to render this complexity is to engage in a strategy of representation based on exteriority; instead, the novel offers a strategic aporia in the form of negative Western constructions and Dat's negation of them.

The relationship between Ada and Huang Vu also reveals the difficulties in knowing the "other." Although the union suggests a form of cultural reconciliation, the novel is careful not to idealize the romance. The romantic image of tropical lovemaking is undercut by its being inextricably bound up with the materialities of exhaustion, alcohol, and poverty (227). This movement beyond surface discourse—in this case the romance—also extends to racialized constructions of the East. Vu implicitly knows what Ada does not: to offer extended discursive representations based on superficial details risks a reductive vision. Ada believes it is significant for her lover to know "that she was a good cook, and that she could shoot a gun with accuracy," but Vu explains that "to talk too much about Ada would reduce Ada" (266). Ada, unable to move beyond the Western discourse, views Vietnam as an unreal place, a dream that "she had not been able to decipher the meaning [of]" (267). In this way, she resembles her father, Charles, who returns to Vietnam in order to make sense of his past but is faced with an unfamiliar world and is ultimately "lost" (110). Existing within the Orientalist discourses that shaped his vision of Vietnam during the war, Charles is often unable to move beyond this paradigm and so is ultimately ill-equipped to recon-

cile himself to his past and Eastern culture. By depicting the difficulty Western protagonists face when imposing stereotype, their inability to “know” the East, Bergen frustrates the privileged place of stereotypical constructions and replaces them with a strategic absence in the form of Western confusion.

Western discourses are also stymied in relation to Vietnamese culture at large. Contemporary discussions of Vietnam often suggest that it requires rescue. Yen Le Espiritu has argued that as a “controversial, morally questionable and unsuccessful’ war, the Vietnam War has the potential to unsettle the master narratives of World War II—in which the United States rescues desperate people from tyrannical governments and reforms them ‘into free and advanced citizens of the postwar democratic world’” (329). Having lost the Vietnam War, the United States had no liberated country or people to showcase (329). Yet in the absence of a liberated Vietnam, the U.S. media, Espiritu contends, appear to have produced a substitute: the freed and reformed Vietnamese refugee. The media have deployed the refugee figure, the purported grateful beneficiary of U.S.-style freedom, to remake the Vietnam War into a just and successful war (329). Rather than adhering to this new (and condescending) narrative of Vietnam, which relies on Vietnamese victimization to enhance the Western image of itself and in turn efface Vietnamese experience and realities, Bergen’s novel refuses to “save the refugee.” Multiple references to prostitution, crime, and corruption suggest ongoing economic, political, and social difficulties for contemporary Vietnam and arguably imply the need for rescue. However, the novel complicates these representations by allowing the Vietnamese protagonists to voice their own plight devoid of the rhetoric of victimization. The emphasis for many of the Vietnamese characters is on their desire to survive, not their desire to be saved: Thanh, a South Vietnamese veteran, recognizes “‘history does not fill my stomach’ . . . survival was something he had learned” (114–15). Similarly, the villagers Ada encounters when attempting to unearth her father’s history “don’t care about the war that happened thirty years ago. They care about their crops and their next meal” (213). Again, rather than imposing Western discourses, the novel offers a strategic

aporia, namely, the impasse between the West's presumed need to save Vietnam and the Vietnamese insistence on self-sufficient survival.

This political context is particularly pertinent in contemporary Vietnam, for Bergen's work reveals that the threat of colonization persists. The imperialist urge is especially reflected through the character of Jack Gouds:

"We have work to do" [Jack] said, and as he spoke he looked down into his glass of beer and then lifted his head and said "I love this country. But it is aimless." Elaine said, "Jack has a mission." She shook her head as if the four words she had just uttered were the engine that was pulling the family to some unforeseen and terrible doom. (108)

Jack's "mission" is one of colonization. As Ryan Dunch recognizes, often, "discussions of missions and cultural imperialism . . . seek to demonstrate that missionaries were agents of cultural imperialism by showing their direct links to political and economic imperialism" (308). Jack certainly holds the colonizer's condescension: "I love this country. But it is aimless." The irony is, of course, that it is Jack who proves to be aimless, running off with Jon, Ada's brother, seemingly to have a homosexual affair. The novel clearly critiques his endeavour. Andries describes him as "the most dangerous kind of man": "Jack and his kind see the world as fodder for their beliefs. As if a person were a seedling and all you had to do was stick the seedling into a particular soil, water it, give it a special light, and it would grow into a Christian" (248). As Charles clearly asserts, "the Vietnamese should be left alone to find their own god" (122). Like the discourses of communism and democracy that fueled and seemingly rationalized the Vietnam War, the rhetoric of Christianity is critiqued as an outside influence that distorts and threatens a culture.

Ultimately, Bergen may recognize the human elements and costs of the Vietnam War, but the novel remains critically aware of the political dimensions that sustained it and continue to pose a threat to contemporary Vietnam. These aspects often manifest as problematic absences and abstractions that are in part reconciled through the traumatic night-

mare. Representations of the traumatic nightmare in the novel reveal their frustration of linear time and complication of racially loaded Gothic aesthetics, thereby suggesting similarities rather than differences between the East and West, the Orient and the Occident. However, even though facets of the traumatic nightmare have universal implications that can "provide the very link between cultures" (Caruth 11), trauma cannot do so exclusively. Bergen's novel reveals the necessity for multiple counter-discursive strategies to resist the elisions that result not only from Orientalist discourses but also the apolitical humanism that threatens to act as a coefficient of any universalizing discourse, including that of the psychopathology of trauma.

Notes

- 1 The term "trauma" cannot be approached as a relatively stable, definitive concept, particularly in psychoanalytic and medical discourses, which often inform our contemporary interdisciplinary responses to trauma in the humanities. Current trauma theory, described by Hartman as a "virtual community of explorers" (537), is not a unified body of investigation, even though critics consistently tend to rely on specific psychoanalytic texts, such as Freud and Breuer's *Studies on Hysteria* and Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Although trauma is approached and interpreted in various ways in contemporary formulations, in general, the two terms we now associate with the term tend to be "catastrophe" and "wound." The first, catastrophe, refers to the event of trauma. As Erikson points out, "in classical medical usage 'trauma' refers not to the *injury* inflicted but to the *blow* that inflicted it, not to the *state of mind* that ensues but to the *event* that provoked it" (184; emphasis in original). The American Psychiatric Association explains that this traumatic event is "outside the range of usual human experience." This description of traumatic catastrophe clearly allows trauma to be situated in relation to various, wide-ranging events; however, this scope should not be understood as a homogenization of all forms of traumatic catastrophe. Specificity is required, as is also an awareness that attempting to inscribe traumatic catastrophe to an objective external event is often difficult and, at times, futile. Traumatic catastrophe often confounds neat binaries between private and public, individual and collective, inside and outside, as well as objective and subjective. The second term associated with trauma is wound. Trauma is also a psychological condition caused by an overwhelming event, and this condition is characterized by symptomatic responses. Trauma, thus, can also be described as a mental wound. As Caruth explains, trauma is derived from the Greek meaning "wound . . . referring to an injury inflicted on the body," and has come to

- mean “particularly in medical and psychiatric literature, and most certainly in Freud’s text . . . a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind” (3). Primarily relying on Freud’s theorization of trauma in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Caruth defines the psychopathology of this mental wound as “a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviours stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event” (4).
- 2 There has recently been a resurgence of interest in the Vietnam War in Canadian fiction. Thúy’s 2010 Governor General’s Literary Award for Fiction winner *Ru* (2009), Skibsrud’s 2010 Giller Prize-winning *The Sentimentalists* (2009), Gibb’s *The Beauty of Humanity Movement* (2010), and Lam’s *The Headmaster’s Wager* (2012) have garnered particular attention.
 - 3 Herman argues that research on shell shock, which began with the First World War, reached its apotheosis in the aftermath of the Vietnam War with the development of PTSD, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, in the DSM-III, *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders of the American Psychiatric Association* (1980). She interprets the diagnostic category of PTSD as a way to unite specific events of trauma and the miscellaneous histories of trauma investigation together. Herman and other theorists of trauma, such as Lifton, in their study of the Vietnam War, focus on what Hacking has referred to as “depth knowledge”: that is, “a knowledge that there are facts out there about memory, truths-or-falsehoods to get a fix on” (69). This interpretation of the seminal importance of the Vietnam War as engendering a coherent “depth knowledge” of trauma in the conceptualization of PTSD has, however, been the object of critique. Hacking describes the impact of the Vietnam War as the “revenge” of “memoro-politics,” because “the VA hospitals cultivated Post Traumatic Stress Disorder” (78). In other words, Hacking interprets the legacy of shell shock and its culmination as PTSD as a discursive construct: “The past works only when there are procedures for making it work” (78). Similarly, Young in his genealogical approach to trauma critiques Herman’s conclusions about the historical development of what is now termed Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, recognizing that any attempt to generalize the notion of traumatic memory is futile: “the disorder is not timeless, nor does it possess an intrinsic unity” (5). Instead, “it is glued together by practices, technologies, and narratives with which it is diagnosed, studied, treated, and represented” (5).
 - 4 This essay’s interpretation of cultural difference will, therefore, focus on victims of trauma who exhibit symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. It investigates if American and Vietnamese sufferers of PTSD can dismantle and overcome reductive, colonial ways of understanding the “other” through empathetic identification based on shared psychological symptoms. This focus distinguishes

this analysis from Burrows' study, which considers the inefficacy of trauma to address and to change structural inequalities. It also diverges from discussions of trauma that consider the sympathetic identification between a person who has not experienced trauma and the victim of trauma who exhibits symptoms of PTSD. Critics such as Laub, Felman, and Caruth have particularly addressed the ways in which trauma is contagious, how the very act of listening to or reading a trauma narrative can impact the non-sufferer. A psychoanalyst who has worked with Holocaust survivors, Laub focuses on the listener's role in hearing the narratives of traumatized patients, recognizing that the listener (who has not suffered the traumatic event) not only allows the survivor to understand his or her trauma but also becomes a participant in the event that has traumatized the patient:

The emergence of the narrative which is being listened to—and heard—is, therefore, the process and the place wherein the cognizance, the “knowing” of the event is given birth to. The listener, therefore, is a party to the creation of knowledge *de novo*. The testimony to the trauma thus includes its hearer, who is, so to speak, the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time. By extension, the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience the trauma in himself. (57)

In effect, Laub argues that during a face-to-face encounter between a victim, who enacts the psychological effects of an ungraspable experience, and a witness, who has not suffered trauma and listens, the witness is contaminated by the catastrophic event. Inherent in Laub's theory, therefore, is the belief that trauma is contagious; when trauma is experienced by one person, it can be passed on to non-sufferers through dialogue. As Caruth puts it: “This is the danger—the danger . . . of trauma's ‘contagion,’ of the traumatization of the ones who listen” (10). Tal has critiqued the emphasis Laub places on the listener, positing that the auditor who has not experienced the traumatic event first-hand commits “an appropriative gambit of stunning proportions” and ultimately comes problematically close to veering attention away from the speaker, who has directly experienced the traumatic episode (54). In his study of trauma and the Holocaust, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, LaCapra suggests that appropriation of survivors' experiences by a non-sufferer can be avoided if the listener becomes a secondary witness in a particular way. LaCapra posits that listeners should engage in “empathetic unsettlement”; that is, they must empathetically identify with the traumatized speaker's experiences rather than appropriating them, and when subsequently representing these episodes, ensure that their “stylistic effects or, more broadly, effects in writing . . . cannot be reduced to formulas or rules of method” (41).

5 My thanks to Jolise Beaton for pointing me to the significance of Said's work in this context.

6 My thanks to Fan Li for directing me to the importance of *Impasses* in the novel.

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