Remembering and Recording the Vietnam War

Through literary research and analysis, I intend to explore personal, non-fiction literature about the Vietnam War in order to better understand the ways in which (traumatic) experience is translated into written narrative. Given the large body of work that has come out of the Vietnam War, as well as the relative commonality among the experiences being recorded, this literature presents a unique opportunity to explore the genres of memoir and oral history. My academic experience with non-fiction narrative has largely been in the context of post-conflict restoration after mass violations of human rights. I conducted research on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) for a National History Day essay, reading various accounts of both apartheid era human rights violations and post-apartheid reconciliation efforts, including Desmond Tutu’s *No Future Without Forgiveness* and Antjie Krog’s *Country of My Skull*. The TRC itself focused on testimony from personal experiences and spurred my decision to explore personal testimony in post-genocide Rwanda during my Spring 2011 study abroad in Kigali, Rwanda. For this independent research project, I conducted interviews with survivors about the testimony-giving process and read a great deal of personal testimony of the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi. In this essay, I was specifically examining the interaction between the construction of national narrative and personal narrative. While I chose to emphasize the process through which the country constructs its collective narrative, I felt that there was a great deal that could have been examined about the individual’s process of transforming a traumatic experience into a verbal or written narrative.
In addition to these research projects, both of which inform my current understanding of post-conflict narrative, I specifically studied the genre of memoir through a class titled the Contemporary American Memoir with Professor Warde in Spring 2010. The class not only familiarized me with major works of memoir, but also provided me with insight into various literary issues that arise within the genre, the most fascinating and fundamental of which may be that involving the translation of experience into written text. This act raises a variety of questions about the nature of truth, fiction, and non-fiction, and I find these questions particularly interesting. Because it unites post-conflict personal narrative with the genre of memoir, Vietnam War literature is especially appealing to me. Its memoirs and oral histories provide an intensely dramatic context within which to examine and question the way experience is remembered and recorded.

My methodology for this project will consist of literary analysis of memoirs and oral histories, analysis of some visual images, and an investigation of theoretical and background sources applicable to the topic. Because oral histories undergo a very different process of transcription than memoirs, they will expand my view of how wartime experience reshapes itself as narrative. The editor of an oral history revises and organizes the words of other people, while the author of a memoir manipulates his or her own voice and experience. I will consider several types of oral history, ranging from the most standard form, in which the reader is provided with separate stories attributed to individuals, to more fluid oral histories such as Mark Baker’s Nam. Within each of these genres, I will look most closely at works by American authors, but I will also read several Vietnamese memoirs and oral histories by way of comparison. While I may not deal with these Vietnamese works directly in my final essay, they will deepen my understanding of
the perspective being communicated by American authors. I will also consider some fiction when relevant, as in the case of Tim O’Brien’s *Going After Cacciato* and *The Things They Carried*. These texts will serve to illustrate the fine line between non-fiction and fiction and will provide insight into the language and literary differences between memoir and fiction. I will also spend some time studying visual media of the Vietnam War, including both collections of photographs and documentaries. These sources represent a different approach to capturing and preserving experience, and thus provide examples of the diverse forms through which the Vietnam War was remembered.

In addition to these primary texts, I will consider several histories of the Vietnam War in order to develop a firm understanding of the events, geography, timeline, and historical importance of the conflict, keeping in mind the ways in which these factors might influence literature on the topic. My theoretical ideas will grow from my readings on the nature of autobiography, of war literature in general, and of Vietnam War literature in particular. For example, James Olney's edited collection, *Autobiography*, speaks theoretically of the genre as a whole; Paul Fussell's seminal study of British writers from World War I establishes a framework for thinking about all literature of conflict; and Renate Prescott's article on the reliability of the narrator deals specifically with questions of remembering and recording the Vietnam War by means of oral accounts.

Through this project, in addition to exploring the way in which authors translate experience onto the page, I also hope to examine the interface between the individual and the larger social context. Vietnam War memoirs confront the tension between individuals and the historical forces bearing upon their lives, and I will consider the way
in which this tension influences the literary act of recording war experience. As I draw on the perspectives of various scholars and conduct close analysis of primary works, I will further refine and narrow the focus of my paper.
Bibliography

Primary Works: American

Memoirs


**Oral Histories**


**Letters**


**Fiction**


**Visual Media**


**Primary Works: Vietnamese**

**Memoirs**


**Oral Histories**


**Secondary Works**

**Literary Criticism/Theoretical Framework**


**Historical Background**


**Background on Vietnamese Literature**