"Bringing the War Home:" the role of family in the home front during the American war in Vietnam[1]

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Abstract

This article aims at analyzing how two women writers of the "Vietnam Generation," Bobbie Ann Mason and Jayne Anne Phillips, explored the role played by the traditional hegemonic American family in the social and political conditionings for the war in their respective novels *In Country* and *Machine Dreams*. Though both writers are highly critical of the hegemonic nuclear family, Phillips explores the family structure that led to the war in Vietnam while Mason tackles the family structure that emerged after the war. On the one hand, they charge the bi-parental, patriarchal nuclear family structure with being one of the institutions that socialized children in the discourses that led to the war in Vietnam. On the other, its inflexible structure makes the traditional family unable to take into its fold the divergent models of masculinity that the war generated: a generation of American men who lost the war and for whom the family they had gone all the way to Vietnam to defend no longer offered sanctuary.

Keywords: Vietnam War, family, patriarchy, technology, Jayne Anne Phillips, Bobbie Ann Mason.

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Both Jayne Anne Phillips and Bobbie Ann Mason came of age during the American War in Vietnam and that has shaped at least two of the fictional worlds they have created—Phillip's *Machine Dreams* and Mason's *In Country*. Bruce Springsteen's album *Born in the U.S.A.* figures prominently in Mason's novel. On its front cover, the singer is "facing the flag, as though studying it, trying to figure out its meaning" (Mason, *In Country* 236). Like Springsteen, Mason and Phillips scrutinize the nation in an attempt to make sense of the traumatic event that had left a toll of approximately 58,000 U.S. soldiers dead, some 120,000 of those who returned having committed suicide by 1990 (Boose 603), and the socially complicated and politically cumbersome problem of having to cater to the processes of adjustment of the veterans. The aforementioned novels, written in 1984 and 1985 respectively, when read together, offer a panoramic of U.S. society from the end of WWII to the aftermath of the Vietnam War. While Phillips describes the hegemonic discourses that lead the U.S. into the imperialistic war in Vietnam, Mason concentrates on the devastating effects of those discourses on the generation that fought the war. Both writers challenge the traditional notions of self and nation by highlighting two elements that problematized the process of subject formation for a whole

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generation of American men: on the one hand, the crisis of the faith in technological progress and on the other, the social and personal dissatisfaction brought about by the imposition of the heteronormative reproductive family as the only acceptable social structure during the 1950s.

1. "This is the end:" Vietnam or "the failure of American technological-managerial arrogance"[2]

Most academic work on the literary and filmic production about the American war in Vietnam coincides in pointing out how common it is for said cultural artifacts to understand the war as a turning-point event, as the end of an era. Paradigmatic among these representations is the opening scene of Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979); in it, the countercultural icon Jim Morrison sings "This is the end" while U.S. planes destroy the lush and static jungle, in a sequence of unsettling beauty. Vietnam veteran Philip Beidler may have been the critic who best described the nature of the "end" that the U.S. suspected to have reached in Vietnam. According to Beidler, the American war in Vietnam—the first military defeat of the U.S., the moment in which the country laid bare its "geopolitical ignorance and a technological arrogance literally wrecking itself against the great, ancient, impassive face of Asia"— was fictionalized as "a trip to the end of history in its traditional western sense—history as the inevitability of progress, the perfectibility of man, the victory of technology, the utopian fulfillment of reason, science, objective knowledge (6-7).

The United States became an independent and sovereign state in the context of the revolutions inspired by the ideas of the Enlightenment. The "American Patriots" found inspiration in the political thought of philosopher John Locke, forerunner of modern liberal ideology, and called for a form of government based on the exercise of reason and on objective and scientific knowledge, the main role of which would be to defend the moral tenets, which defined the American project. In this "New Order," technological progress, understood as the best indicator of the development of the society that enjoyed it, was the tool that ensured social wellbeing, which, in turn, favored stability and promoted republican tenets. Thus, during the American Revolution, technology was perceived not only as "the agent of material progress and prosperity" but also, and mainly, as "the defender of liberty and instrument of republican virtue" (Kasson 8). With each new invention, technology reinforced its role as the promoter of material prosperity, liberty and republican virtue, and the belief grew strong that "technology would help to preserve the Union and make the republican experiment possible" (Kasson 35).[3] Technological progress made the republic strong and the republic, in turn, generated the necessary conditions for technological development, in a fruitful and placid commonality of interests.

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[2] Phrase taken from Philip Beidler's "The Last Huey" (4).

[3] Thus, for example, in 1810, Robert Fulton, engineer and inventor and the man who built the first profitable steam boat, said, when addressing President Madison and the U.S. Congress: "every order of things, which has the tendency to remove oppression and meliorate the condition of man, by directing his ambition to useful industry is, in effect, republican" (qtd. in Kasson 14).

In the nineteenth century, this accord was reinforced by the growing technicalization and industrialization of the country, an unstoppable process which became a symbol both of the validity and the vigor of the republican political system, and of the able and firm leadership of its defenders: "in the nineteenth century men glorified machines not simply as functional objects but as signs and symbols of the future of America" (Kasson 41). Moreover, against the background of the euphemistically-called "Indian Removal," the improvement of military technology was understood as further evidence, indissociable from the whole, of the consolidation of the moral tenets, which ruled progress and, by extension, the destiny of the nation. In the West, the Bible and the rifle went hand in hand and the influence of the former was considered just as civilizing as that of the effects of the latter. Just as could be read in the program for the "Buffalo Bill's Wild West" show between 1886 and 1893:

> [While it is] a trite saying that "the pen is mightier than the sword," it is equally true that the bullet is the pioneer of civilization, for it has gone hand in hand with the axe that cleared the forest, and with the family Bible and school book. Deadly as has been its mission in one sense, it has been merciful in another; for without the rifle ball we of America would not be to-day in the possession of a free and united country, and mighty in our strength. (qtd. in Slotkin 171)

In the long process of territorial domination, with its attendant genocidal elimination of peoples and cultures, for whom the cost in lives and suffering "cannot be accurately […] not even roughly measured" (Zinn 125), the idea was forged, central to the U.S. national identity, that the role of military technology was to defend the democratic tenets and the moral values of the nation, from the influence—always perceived as pernicious—of the "Other." According to Richard Slotkin, "the 'moral truth' of the frontier experience […] was the exemplification of the principle that violence and savage war were the necessary instruments of American progress" (171); "the quiet acceptance of conquest and murder in the name of progress" (Zinn 9) opens the path to the development of technology whose value is set, perversely, in direct proportional relation to its capacity for destruction, or, to resort again to euphemism, to its capacity to "civilize barbarians" and defend democratic values—the atomic bomb and chemical weapons being the most heinous examples of said correlation. According to Susan Sontag, "American policy is still powered by the fantasy of Manifest Destiny, though the limits were once set by the borders of the continent, whereas today America's destiny embraces the entire world. There are still more hordes of redskins to be mowed down before virtue triumphs; as the classic Western movies explain, the only good Red is a dead Red" (qtd in Bates 32).[4]

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[4] It is not surprising that, in the literature about the American war in Vietnam, we find countless comparisons between the war in Asia and the frontier war against the Native Americans. Milton J. Bates describes this phenomenon as follows in *The Wars We Took to Vietnam. Cultural Conflict and Storytelling*: "There are many reasons we might choose to revisit the American frontier in our war stories. The physical characteristics of Vietnam and its people obviously influenced the choice of historical analogy. A respected military historian maintains that

In Vietnam, the U.S. was using the most sophisticated military technology ever; a technology that had led them from the hatchet that cleared the American forests to the Huey helicopters,[5] the napalm and the white phosphorous which defoliated the Vietnamese jungle, from the rifle, "pioneer of civilization" to the M60 whose blasts should have set the rhythm for the democratization of the "savages" of Southeast Asia. However, this technological prowess did not translate, as might have been expected, into a clear victory of democratic moral values. On the contrary, the war in Vietnam is remembered as a war without clear objectives, which polarized a public opinion that doubted its morality. The U.S. continued to hold the technological and military upper hand but it had lost, precisely, that which conferred meaning to said mastery: the moral principles whose defense justified the investment in military technology; the war in Vietnam was, to quote Beidler again, a trip to the end of history and technology revealed itself lethal and its use unjustifiable. In the words of war veteran and novelist Philip Caputo: "when we marched into the rice paddies on that damp March afternoon, we carried, along with our packs and rifles, the implicit convictions that the Viet Cong would be quickly beaten and that we were doing something altogether noble and good. We kept the packs and rifles; the convictions, we lost" (Caputo xiv). A significantly high percentage of U.S. citizens interpreted that war as an imperialist endeavor fought against an oppressed people. Their sympathies, paradoxically, were with the pre-technological people. This emotional alignment inevitably shook the ruling tenets of a country founded on the already mentioned identification of technology and progress with democracy and morality.

Veterans who write about the war in Southeast Asia tend to refer to and reflect on this disappointing lack of ethics in the use of technology. Thus, for instance, Caputo in *A Rumor of War* ironizes about it when he writes: "ethics seemed to be a matter of distance and technology. You could never go wrong if you killed people at long range with sophisticated weapons […] 'Kill VC.' That was the strategy, the best our best military minds could come up with: organized butchery. But organized or not, butchery was butchery, so who was to speak of rules and ethics in a war that had none?" (218); Robert Mason in *Chickenhawk* admires the effective though simple Vietnamese technology and, in so doing, casts doubts on the validity of U.S. technology: "I wondered how our technology was going to help the Vietnamese. Maybe after we had killed off the people—like these villagers, who knew how to live so elegantly in this country—the

'given the physical realities of Vietnam, the war there would have been much more understandable if Vietnam had been compared not to the United States in the 20th century but to America as it existed in the 1750s during the French and Indian Wars,' when most settlers lived along the coast and relied on western outposts to protect them from attack. Parts of western Vietnam, notably the jungle-covered slopes of the Annamese Cordillera, are still true wilderness, inhabited by tigers and tribes that the lowland Vietnamese consider primitive. American military units fought the jungle, and the enemy it protected, with the Rome plow […] and chemical defoliants, latter-day equivalents of the pioneer's ax and torch" (Bates 9-10).

[5] About the Huey helicopters, Philip Beidler wrote: "The Huey. The Bell UH-I Iroquois Helicopter. It was beyond anything else the showpiece, in attitudinal expectation and in operational fact, of what James William Gibson, in his study of the failure of American technological-managerial arrogance in Vietnam, has entitled The Perfect War. It became the corporate embodiment of our assumptions of historical innocence and politico-military invincibility, positive thinking became the ultimate positivism, a mentality of the operational totally identifying the thing with the function" (Beidler 4-5).

survivors would *have* to have our technology. That waterwheel was as efficient as any device our engineers could produce. The knowledge that built it was being systematically destroyed" (300-301); poet John Balaban, in contemplation of the destruction brought about by U.S. intervention, wonders: "The inventions of America, those / gadgets, machines, technical wonders— / is this what they are for?" (28). If American technology can't be of any help to the Vietnamese, there is nothing left to do but admit, as R. Mason had anticipated: "We're beyond a *reason* to be here. We're *here*" (63).

2. The genderization of technology

The gradual mechanization of U.S. society brought with it both a complex distribution of jobs and tasks by gender and the development of the discursive justification of the division of society in the too well-know spheres of influence: the public and the private. Technological progress and industrialization were both considered phenomena of the public sphere, mainly occupied and managed—with some memorable exceptions—by men, and read as the driving force of the national economic prosperity; the domestic sphere, the home, the hearth, is women's stronghold, the place where she builds the peaceful and pure sanctuary where men take refuge after their daily exhausting and energy-draining exposure to the public sphere: "homes are idealized as the places which we would like to retreat to when the world of industrialization becomes too grim to bear; home is where the 'heart' is; industry is where 'dogs are eating dogs' and 'only money counts'" (Schwartz Cowan 4). Within the logics of progress sketched in the previous section, it is taken for granted that the mechanization of and the improvements in the public sphere would also be in the best interest of the private sphere. Women are ignorant of the toughness of the public sphere but they enjoy a forever improving standard of living, thanks to the efforts of fathers, husbands, and brothers.

However, a closer look to the effects of technicalization in U.S. society reveals a very different reality. To start with, women have never been really absent form the public sphere: working class women were visible on the factory floors as their salaries were vital to sustain the family economy. Their incorporation to the market economy, moreover, came to be considered an unfortunate conjuncture in those historical moments in which men were burdened with governing the country and making it grow geographically and economically: "while able-bodied men tilled the soil, manufactures would be produced by machines, assisted by marginal laborers: women, children, and the aged" (Kasson 27). Besides, machines and appliances became ineludible elements in the home, and contrary to what is defended by hegemonic discourses, they did not make housewifery any easier. The undeniable fact that the first appliances—even the most primitive ones—lightened the nature of the chores, only meant, as Ruth Schwartz Cowan documents brilliantly, that said chores, traditionally shared by all the members of the household, fell now entirely on the shoulders of the women in the house. Thus, husbands and sons were freed from their domestic tasks and could join the labor force and earn the salaries that had become necessary to buy the manufactured goods that, in the market economy, had substituted the homemade ones. But the use of better tools and of ever more sophisticated machines and the

possibility of acquiring ready-made goods paradoxically did not revert into an increase of the free time enjoyed by women but into an increase in the complexity of domestic chores and of the frequency with which they had to be done: the invention of the stove and the possibility to buy flour and butter, for instance, made families abandon the one-dish meals and adopt a diet with entrée, main course and cake for desert and the possibility of buying ready-made cloth lead to the common acceptance that the possession of a varied wardrobe was a sign of social status (Schwartz Cowan 45). The heyday of this process was reached in the 1950s when the common presence of appliances in the household somehow made it imperative to wash and iron the bed sheets and to vacuum the floor on a daily basis, to mention only two of the most common domestic chores.

As a result of what has been sketched above, the coexistence in the U.S. of two very different versions of the "blessings" of technology, which correspond to two diametrically opposed historical experiences is not surprising. For most men, mechanization meant the emergence of a prosperous society which bestowed on them the honorable task of forming the public sphere, and defending the republican tenets of liberty and justice: "this was a vision that would be extended and amplified throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century as new technological developments suggested new possibilities […] Technology would help to preserve the Union and make the republican experiment possible" (Kasson 35). For most women, who had been turned into shadow workers, it meant an increase in the chores they were responsible for which enslaved them to the most menial, and worst paid jobs in the industrial economy. This distribution of jobs also made it possible for the nuclear family to emerge as the unquestionable model of social organization and the locus from which the moral values of the American nation would be preserved.

Following this difference in gendered experiences of technology, men and women were likely to have different interpretations of the demise of the U.S. army in Vietnam. Most of the male population had been socialized in the discourse of blind faith in the unstoppable progress of technology, a progress intertwined with the promotion and defense of the national ethos, for which they were responsible, just as the American Patriots had been during the War of Independence, and more recently, their own grandfathers during WWI and their fathers during WWII. The generation of men who fought in Southeast Asia had to face the dishonor of being the first U.S. soldiers to lose a war; the military defeat left them at a disadvantage in front of their parents' generation, prevented them from transiting into a responsible and mature adulthood and faced them with the falsehood of the myth for which they had been commanded to fight and die. In short, they were deprived of the possibility of identifying themselves either with their biological fathers, or with their symbolic one: the state which, as most of them saw it after their experience, was just as adrift as they were. As a consequence, there was a disruption in the patrilineal line of defense of the moral tenets of the nation and its patriarchal structure was badly endangered. Linda Boose described this historical moment as follows: "'Vietnam' signifies […] the site of a traumatic break between the men of one generation and those of another—between the fathers and the sons. […] America emerged from the Vietnam War still a patriarchal

system—but a patriarchy with an unoccupied and no longer occupiable center" (601-602). The fiction about the conflict written by veterans tends to voice their sense of uprootedness and alienation from a nation that had revealed itself lacking in moral values while it revises the past in search for the origin if their present situation.

From the beginning of the mechanization of the country and contrary to official propaganda, some women perceived technology as a source of social injustice that went against the grain of the foundational republican tenets;[6] as a consequence, their interpretation of the tragedy in Vietnam is tainted less with a sense of sudden and unpleasant surprise than with the feeling that the lessons on the enslaving potential of the machines and the falsity of the public discourses that preached the inextricable link between progress and morality were being confirmed. "Granddad killed Japanese soldiers in World War II. Her father had been killed because that was the way the game was played. Some lived and some died. There was no other conclusion to be drawn" (B. A. Mason 210) states Sam, the teenage main character in Bobbie Anne Mason's *In Country*.

The questioning of the centrality and goodness of technology and progress by the men of the generation who fought the war in Vietnam coincided with large numbers of women expressing their unease at the social structure generated by said technology. The most often mentioned topics in the feminist rallies of the times were issues concerning the day-to-day life of women: sexual harassment at the work place, domestic violence, salary inequality between men and women, the absence of a state-funded net of kindergartens which were necessary for women to access the job market, the degraded living conditions of the working classes, and the illegality of abortion rank high among them. All of the issues listed above have in common that the injustice they point at is the result of the division of society into two exclusive spheres, the private and the public, which, as we have sketched above, is the result of the prevalence of technology and progress in discourses of U.S. national identity. The genderization of technology explored above is, thus, read as a tool that has contributed to the submission of women. Following that same trend of thought, technology is read as a weapon of male domination of the female body and, not surprisingly, in the years of the fight against the war in Vietnam, said domination through technology was equated to that of the Vietnamese people at the hands of the USA. This is precisely the logic underneath Adrienne Rich's 1973 article "Vietnam and Sexual Violence":

> the bombings […] if they have anything to teach us, must be understood in the light of something closer to home, both more private and painful, more general and endemic, than institutions, class, social oppression, the hubris of the Pentagon, or the ruthlessness of the right-wing administration; the bombings are so wholly sadistic, gratuitous and demonic that they can finally be seen, if we care to see them, for what they are: acts of concrete

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[6] For a problematization of the reading of technology as progress, see: Edward Tenner's *Why Things Bite Back: Technology and the Revenge of Unintended Consequences*; for the gender aspects of this issue, see Ruth Schwartz Cowan's *More Work for Mother. The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave*, and Joan Rothschild's *Machina Ex Dea. Feminists Perspectives on Technology*.

sexual violence, an expression of the congruence of violence and sex in the masculine psyche. (109)

3. From WWII to Vietnam: the genderization of technology and the demise of the nuclear family in Phillips' *Machine Dreams* and Mason's *In Country*

Phillips and Mason, as members of what was labeled as the "Vietnam Generation,"[7] feel it is their responsibility to explain (also to themselves) both the traumatic events and the circumstances that had led to them. While Phillips explores the nature of the society—and the family structure on which it was grounded—that led to the war in Vietnam, Mason, in turn, studies the nature of the society and the family structure that emerged from the war. Central to the fictional worlds of both authors is the toll paid by a whole generation of men who were trying to shape their adult subjectivities in dialogue with an hegemonic discourse which demanded that they measured up to their biological fathers and to their symbolic one—the state—embodied in President Kennedy's "ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country." In Linda Boose's words:

> [D]espite even the readiness of the dutiful sons to prove themselves heirs to the patrilineal "line unbroken," even the sons who went to Vietnam failed. They did not return winners, as had their fathers from World War II, but left an unforgivable blot on the unblemished war record they inherited. And the fact that some 120,000 of those who returned have by now committed suicide […] suggests that the sons of patriarchy unconsciously hear and obey a silent but omnipresent commandment written out in ancient Sparta as the edict to return from a war with one's shield or on it. (603)

The men in Phillips and Mason's fiction are examples of said truncated transition to a complete and fruitful adulthood that Linda Boose describes as "the radical truncation of the oedipal journey: a narrative, ultimately, of hollowed-out paternity and perpetuated sonship" (601). In *Machine Dreams*, Mitch, a veteran from WWII, does not manage to become the provider of material well-being that every head of family was supposed to be; Bill, his son, volunteers to fight in Vietnam, refusing to pursue a college education that would have granted him a deferral, would have kept him out of harm's way and would have given him skills and knowledge to turn him into what his father couldn't be: a provider. In *In Country*, Emmet, Sam's uncle on her mother's side, is described as a "case of arrested development" (234) by his sister,

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[7] David Wyatt, in *Out of the Sixties: Storytelling and the Vietnam Generation*, lists the shared characteristics that allow us to call that specific group of artists a "generation:" they are members of the "baby boom" who grew up in well-off families but whose transit to adulthood was problematized both by the war in Vietnam and by the energy crisis of 1973. They access political activism during their college years. Their artistic referents are the "Beat Generation" and Norman Mailer. However, Wyatt concludes, what makes the connection among the members of this generation more clearly evident is the way in which they conceptualize the family. According to Wyatt, "for the generation of the sixties, the family proves an 'instrument of grief' at once spurned and craved" (7).

Sam's mother, and he describes himself as a frustrated, unsuccessful father figure: "I *want* to be a father. But I can't" (225, emphasis in original).

The inappropriateness of the male protagonists in these novels is the result of the difficulties they encounter in the process of negotiating two of the fundamental tenets in the definition of U.S. national identity: the faith, on the one hand, in technology as a source of progress and, on the other, in the nuclear family as the only acceptable form of social organization. Moreover, if these men do not manage to embody the resultant hegemonic model of masculinity, it is not, in Mason and Phillips' texts, because of their shortcomings but because of how unattainable the model they are being asked to perpetuate is.

In both novels, technology, which fascinates the male characters, is presented as an inefficient and destructive element and the progress it is supposed to bring about is questioned. In *Machine Dreams*, Phillips re-evaluates the post-WWII consensus which described said war as the definitive war of Good against Evil, and presents it, on the contrary, as the historical turning point in which technology and mechanization were put to the task of destroying human lives. This phenomenon had been extensively discussed in relation to the concentration camps and their almost Fordist way of functioning,[8] but Phillips extends it to the operating methods of the U.S. army. Mitch has a recurrent nightmare about his participation in WWII. In it, he operates a bulldozer with which he picks up the corpses spread across one of the beaches occupied by the U.S. army:

> [T]he smell was bad, horrible and terrible and full of death, he couldn't think of a word to say what the smell was, it rose up underneath and around him and he turned to get away. Behind the smell someone kept crying, weeping like a child on and on as the smell broke in the heat, ten in the morning and hot as hell and the sky a searing bright blue mass over the dried rust red of the bodies. A twisted khaki of limbs and more he didn't want to see clearly opened flat and mashed and rumpled […] he looked over the metal dozer track to his left and one of the bodies lay close by, the rear of the trousers torn open, the small hips yellowish and mangled like the crushed halves of a peach. The shirt had caught fire and burned nearly off, the splayed arms above the head were sleeveless past the shoulder and one arm was a blackened stick with the hand still curled at the end […] He tightened his mask and realized the dozer blade was already down, when had he lowered it? What the hell, he was loosing his mind, he shoved the gear into forward as the smell assailed him, pushing, pushing back. He felt the give of the earth, just earth, had to think it was all just earth like at Wheeling, working of the Reeder road with Clayton. (64-65)

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[8] For more information, see Hannah Arendt's "Social Science Techniques and the Study of Concentration Camps," and Michaels Thad Allen's *The Business of Genocide: The SS, Slave Labor, and the Concentration Camps*.

Significantly, Mitch points out the continuity that exists between operating the bulldozers with which he was building roads in the United States and the ones with which he was getting rid of the corpses left behind by the U.S. army: in both cases, in theory, machines open the way to progress and republican and democratic ideals. However, the text denaturalizes said correlation by pointing at "the smell […] horrible and terrible and full of death" (64), the smell of the unjustifiable high toll in human lives.

The pressing questions, which emerged out of the experience of destruction of the two world wars, however, do not change in the slightest the national discourse on technology and progress—not even after the Dresden bombings or the devastation caused by the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The victory over the forces of evil sealed any process of revision and the model of society that led to those wars went unquestioned, and the men of the following generations, as portrayed by Phillips and Mason, were still trapped in the same behavioral pattern, despite their growing awareness of the inappropriateness of the model of masculinity they found themselves trying to embody. Technology, far from exemplifying the progressive movement of history, had become an end in itself; it kept men occupied long after it had ceased to be serviceable to fulfill the task for which it had been designed. To the men of those generations all that was left was the meaningless repetition of certain attitudes, which were reminders of a pre-Vietnam identity that was gradually losing its centrality. The post-WWII male characters in Phillips and Mason's novels act just for the sake of staying active and so as to dodge their difficulties in defining their masculine identity at a time in which the certainties of the past were quickly dissolving. Their paralyzing preoccupation with the mechanical aspects of reality hides their inability to confront their feelings and their fears and is articulated narratively around their poorly repressed desire to become a cog in a machine that, however imperfect, does not feel pain.

Sam, the main female character in *In Country,* concludes that "all the men she knew fiddled with gadgets. They were always fixing something" (191). Danner, the main female character in *Machine Dreams*, describes the relationship between her father and her brother as a mere transmission of technical details:

> He [her father] knew all about the Brush Fork house; he'd contracted the labor and built it himself. He'd designed the heating system, radiant heat piped under the floor so the parquet squares were always warm. He knew how well the floor was built; the parquet had been specially made. Billy's [her brother's] investigation of the house was exploration my father understood: the house was my father's, what he'd made, what he owned. Information he wanted Billy to have. (370)

In *Machine Dreams*, Mitch's reaction to the progressive deterioration of his marriage, that will end up in divorce, is to insist on building a nuclear refuge in the basement and to obsess over the technical details of the project: "I can make an airtight shelter back there—rig up an air-pipe vent and hand pump through one of the windows, then brick them up with cement block. We've got

the water tank we could siphon to supplement the containers, and I'll need about a hundred sandbags to block the doorways" (184). His hectic occupation doesn't allow him any free time to talk to his wife about their problems. He may be trying to protect the family from a nuclear disaster, but he is incapable of protecting it from itself.

In *In Country*, the two men who shape Sam's life during the summer of '84, her uncle Everett and Tom, a Vietnam vet she falls in love with, react in exactly the same way when faced with en emotional problem: they occupy themselves obsessively with mechanical problems. Tom has turned this evasive maneuver into his *modus vivendi* and he is actually a car mechanic. After an embarrassing sexual encounter with Sam, frustrated because of the erectile dysfunction he suffers from as a side effect of his combat experience, Sam finds Tom "tinkering with a dirt bike. He was already dirty from his work. He asked her if she wanted some eggs and she said yes, thinking he would come back upstairs with her, but he told her where the bread and eggs were and told her to help herself" (130). By being thoroughly immersed in a reparation task, he avoids the emotional component of his incipient relationship with Sam. Sam's uncle, Emmett, reacts in a similar way after a particularly acute episode of PTSD. Emmett concentrates on: "digging a hole alongside the house. He was shoveling dirt furiously, heaping it on the grass. […] Emmett kept working till dark [...] He seemed obsessed. He spaded the hard clay, and when he hit rocks he gouged them out with a pickax. Sam had never seen him work so hard" (44). Emmett justifies his ferocious commitment to this task by claiming he is worried about the solidity of the house: "you take a structural weakness. One thing leads to another, and then it all falls apart" (60). Sam knows that her uncle is overreacting—"'Are you afraid the house will fall down?' Sam asked. Houses didn't just fall down. If they did, she would have noticed." (60)—, and blames his attitude on the discourses in which Emmett had been socialized: "'That sounds like the domino theory,' Sam said" (60). What those discourses and the attitudes they foster hide is that the "structural weakness" neither Emmett nor Tom can face is that in their own lives.

The destabilization of the discourse on the civilizing potential of technology goes hand in hand with that on the centrality of the nuclear family. As I have posed above, the unquestionability of the nuclear family as the only acceptable form of social organization was the direct result of the consolidation of the industrial capitalist model. Not surprisingly, in the novels analyzed in this article, the criticism of the discourse on the blessings of technology is complemented by a criticism of the discourse on the blessings of the nuclear family, when understood as the only possible unit of social organization. Both Phillips and Mason see in the nuclear family one of the institutions in charge of spreading the destructive beliefs that lead the country to the war in Vietnam, echoing the theory, defended by the countercultural movements of the 70s, that "the typical American family ought to be considered one of the contributing factors in the [Vietnam] war and, perhaps, western militarism in general" (Berg and Rowe 3). Both Phillips and Mason explore, precisely, "how our myths of the individual and the nuclear family had contributed to the war" (Berg and Rowe 4-5) instead of echoing the belief, common in the Reaganite 1980s when their work was published, that the national failure in Vietnam

would not have taken place had the nuclear family not been under attack from the New Left activists.

In *Machine Dreams*, Mitch and Jane lead troubled existences and try to find solace in marriage: Mitch is looking for sanctuary after his traumatic participation in WWII; Jean needs a respite after her mother's long agony and death. Both hope, against all odds, to put an end to their troubles by repeating the traditional family structure. However, this family model cannot heal their affective wounds. Their dysfunctional home socializes their daughter Danner and their son Billy in the traditional American values which prove devastating for both of them: Billy is educated to belief in the discourse of masculine sacrifice, duty and patriotism and that leads to his early death in Vietnam; Danner is educated in the discourse that predestines her to build a home and be a mother. For Danner, knowing that what is expected of her is to build a home like the one she has witnessed her parents fail at is a paradox that has paralyzing effects and she ends up leading a pointless life, isolated from everything and everybody, devoting all her efforts to keeping some measure of emotional balance: "I went to California on the bus and arrived like a refugee, knowing no one. I found an inexpensive apartment in a rundown house on a bay in a northern coastal town. I got a job in an insurance office. All I do there is type letters, pour coffee, post the mail. I have no diversions from thinking, and the thinking has stretched out" (367-368).

In *In Country*, it is precisely the defense of family ties that pushes Sam's father to his death and then her uncle Emmett, who enlists so as to take revenge on his brother-in-law's death, to his dysfunctionality. Her own family history makes Sam particularly aware of the devastating effects of the obligations exacted by the family structure; that is why she refuses to move to her mother's new home, when she re-marries and has a baby, as Sam interprets that decision as her mother's attempt to start another family, following the traditional American pattern, which Sam has learned to read as the source of all her troubles. On their way to Washington to visit the Vietnam Wall, Sam, Emmett and Sam's grandmother, who travel in an old Volkswagen Beetle—one of the symbols of the counterculture—that had been repaired by Tom—the PTSDed Vietnam vet, another vestige of the 1970s—, spend the night at Irene's, Sam's mother. Irene's new conjugal happiness is described by Sam, the bearer of such traces of the past, as follows: "The baby is cute, but Irene's new husband has no personality. His name is Larry Joiner, but Sam calls him Lorenzo Jones. In social studies class, Sam's teacher used to play tapes of old radio shows. *Lorenzo Jones* was an old soap opera. Sam's mother's life is a soap opera" (5). Sam undermines her mother's hegemonic family model by showing it as a construct and equating it to one of the most openly constructed of all narrative structures, the soap opera, and prefers to stay with her uncle Emmett in an alternative family unit of sorts.

Both Mason and Phillips remain convinced that the traditional family structure, with all its potential regenerative effects on the battered self, is also a source of pain and sorrow. It is the *locus* from which the discourses that generate the conditions for the traumatic experience of war are generated, reinforced and promoted and, on top of that, it proves itself completely incapable of dealing with the difficulties that stem from including in its fold somebody who has been

exposed to said traumatic experience, in part because of its lack of flexibility in accepting new models of masculinity which divert from the traditional one.

Mason puts forward the need to create new family structures based on the will of their members to live together not so much because of their shared blood but because of the affective ties and the love they share. Sam chooses a father figure that challenges the traditional description of the provider who imposes order and discipline in the household; Emmet worries about her from a "paternity" based on the conviction that nothing in his own experience of life can be of help to Sam in hers and so he never tries to impose any preconceived rules of behavior in their home: "Emmett said, 'I came out here to save you, but maybe I can't. Maybe you have to find out yourself. Fuck. You can't learn from the past. The main thing you learn from history is that you can't learn from history. That's what history *is*'" (226). This male figure, with all his shortcomings, his insecurities and emotional problems embodies the alternative father figure and becomes an example of an "ethically reconstituted masculinity" (Boose 585).

The experience of the American War in Vietnam opened "the sudden space in American culture for an alternative to the mythology of a national self born in and valorized by a history of conquest and dominance" (Boose 585). In this alternative space, new models of masculinity are imagined against a background of skepticism about the principles that had regulated traditional masculinity; namely, the cult of technology and progress as tools for the defense of the republican foundational tenets and the perception of man as the all-powerful *pater familias* / provider. While Phillips concentrates on the description of the destructive effects of the hegemony of said principles in pre-Vietnam U.S., Mason explores the destabilizing effects that said war had on the mentioned principles and puts forward a new model of masculinity, paternity and nuclear family in which the *pater familias* becomes one because "'You cared' she said. 'You felt something for me coming out here'" (225). Allowing oneself to feel becomes more important and substitutes the traditional definition of "care" as a synonym of providing for material well-being; worrying for others, the relational dimension of life, takes the place of the obsession with understanding the more mechanical aspects of existence; the acceptance of weakness, vulnerability, and defeat takes the place of the victorious masculinity "icon of (…) potency, physical prowess, and heroism" (Bibby 49) which had doomed a generation of men to go to war in south-east Asia. Not surprisingly, thus, *In Country* and, in general, the panorama offered by Phillips and Mason from post-WWII to post- Vietnam War U.S., closes with an image of Emmett sitting in front of the "Vietnam Memorial" in Washington, looking at the list of the killed in action, a smile insinuating itself for the first time in his face: "Silently, Sam points to the place where Emmett is studying the names low on a panel. He is sitting there cross-legged in front of the wall, and slowly his face bursts into a smile like flames" (245). Allowing oneself to mourn opens the way to hope for a different future.

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