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THE SOLDIER'S PERSPECTIVE IN A RUMOR OF WAR

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This thesis has been approved  
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## A SOLDIER'S PERSPECTIVE IN A RUMOR OF WAR

KYLA HAIME

### ABSTRACT

Tim O'Brien and Michael Herr, two very famous Vietnam War writers, seem to have gotten war narrative theorists to conclude that Vietnam War Literature cannot be cohesive since the war itself is fragmented. Philip Caputo's memoir, A Rumor of War, seems to have taken these components of war and has carefully sewn them together to provide his reader's with a cohesive, truthful, and compelling war narrative. In O'Brien's narrative, The Things They Carried, facts are given and then called into question, making the reader wonder if any of it is true. In his narrative, Dispatches, Herr makes the reader piece together his scattered statements to gain an understanding. Caputo does the opposite of these two writers. Caputo's statements are not scattered but placed together to form a flowing cohesiveness but still showing how fragmented life was in Vietnam for the soldiers who fought there.

I will be discussing each component and then looking at how they are so nicely sewn together to form Caputo's cohesive narrative. The components that I will be looking at are language, emotional/psychological toll, dream sequences, history, and flashbacks. There is also an important part of the narrative where the narrative itself becomes fragmented, as though we are looking through a camera, complete with the clicks that go with it. Each component is interesting to look at by itself but it is also interesting to look at how they fit together. There are also other little tidbits throughout the memoir that are seemingly important to the narrative, so those pieces will also be discussed. Caputo's memoir allows the reader to grasp a deeper understanding of a soldier in war.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

In Vietnam War Literature Criticism, Tim O'Brien and Michael Herr are two authors widely discussed. Usually left out of this mainstream discussion is Philip Caputo. The critics concerned with narratology tend to conclude, as Cornelius Cronin does, that Philip Caputo's memoir A Rumor of War (1977) is "the journey from innocence to experience" (75). These narratology critics tend to discuss Caputo's work in terms of being the classic bildungsroman. Only a couple of critics trying to understand Vietnam War Literature look at specific components of his narrative. In his article "Vocabularies of Experience," J.T. Hansen discusses Caputo's three different languages: Standard English, military language and grunt vocabulary, seen throughout the narrative. O'Brien and Herr are widely discussed by critics and their fragmented works are commonly brought up as a way to write about the Vietnam War.

Philip Caputo published A Rumor of War while still in the military. The earliest criticism of Caputo's work was produced five years later in 1982. Both Philip Beidler and Jeffrey Walsh's works of criticism were printed that year and they both casually

mention Caputo's work. In American Literature and the Experience of Vietnam, Beidler only gives a brief overview of Caputo's narrative: "The book becomes an attempt to trace the everchanging nature of balance between event and vision, phenomenon and perspective, growth of experience and growth of mind" (155). Beidler implies that Caputo's work is nothing but another soldier's account of Vietnam, then leaves Caputo to discuss other authors more in depth. Jeffrey Walsh also gives Caputo only a couple of pages of discussion. In American War Literature 1914 to Vietnam, Walsh believes that Caputo's work is only "a soldier's account of the early stages of war" (201). Caputo's narrative is indeed "soldier's account" of the war but one with unparalleled realism not seen in the kind of writerly, distanced works most commonly used by authors such as Tim O'Brien and Michael Herr, writerly meaning inherently disconnected from their work. These writerly, distanced works leave the reader feeling emotionally detached, something the reader does not feel while reading Caputo's narrative. Caputo shows the verity of his war memoir by taking different components and putting them together to give an honest look at the life of a soldier. Neither Walsh nor Beidler delve any deeper into Caputo's work, content to just skim the surface.

One author who discusses Caputo more in depth is Thomas Myers in his work Walking Point (1988). Myers intermittently discusses Caputo throughout his work but halfway through turns to discuss Caputo more in depth. Myers discusses what he calls the "Two Caputo's": "the warrior in the process of historical transformation and the finished product" (92). These "Two Caputo's" allow the reader to grasp the psychological toll Vietnam has taken on Caputo and the rest of the soldiers by

showing the reader the young Caputo fighting the war and the Caputo who is looking back at his time in Vietnam. Myers is one of the few authors who discuss Caputo's work on a deeper level than just as a classic bildungsroman. Myers leaves his own thoughts on Caputo to discuss Beidler's limited take on Caputo's work, but leaves out any other discussion about Caputo's components and how they form the verity of Caputo's work.

In the 90's two more books were published, Vietnam in American Literature by Philip Melling and Fighting and Writing the Vietnam War by Don Ringnalda. Melling's 1990 work devotes brief attention to Caputo, discussing Caputo's need to tell the truth and then discussing Caputo's tendency to "shout too loud and too often to make himself heard" (64). Melling does not account for the fact that Caputo uses many different components of Vietnam military life to effectively show a soldier's daily life. Caputo wanted to make Vietnam tangible for those who were not there for the War. While Herr and O'Brien have similar goals in writing their works, Caputo is able to produce a greater understanding of the soldiers in war by arranging his memoir in a more compact fashion than the other authors. Another author who misses his chance to discuss Caputo in depth is Ringnalda. He just mentions Caputo in passing but instead has whole chapters on Herr and O'Brien's work. All of the above authors leave out the fact that Caputo is able to give a realistic view of a soldier's life in Vietnam by taking different components of life in war and constructing a cohesive narrative. Caputo's components convey the verisimilitude of his narrative in a cohesive fashion that is able to show the reader a realistic view of war. While Most of Caputo's work is artfully placed together, one section of Caputo's work is left



fragmented and that will be discussed later. By contrast, ragged and fragmented works, like those of Herr and O'Brien, complicate the reader's insight into a soldier's daily life.

In Vietnam War Literature one of the most famous quotes is "Vietnam, Vietnam, Vietnam, We've all been there" (260) from Michael Herr's Dispatches. Authors such as Herr and Tim O'Brien, who will be discussed more in depth later, tend to take this quote for granted and expect their readers to already know what it was like to be in Vietnam. Only a certain segment of the population was literally "there" in Vietnam. One author who does not take for granted that his readers have been "there" is Philip Caputo in his memoir A Rumor of War. The verisimilitude of Caputo's narrative allows the reader to gain an authentic view of a soldier's life during the Vietnam War, whether or not they experienced it first hand. Recreating that view of a soldier's life takes skill that Caputo is usually not given credit for; without his ability to form his components artfully together, Caputo would have just been another soldier writing about his time in Vietnam.

In his narrative, A Rumor of War, Caputo seems to realize that Herr's famous line "Vietnam Vietnam Vietnam, we've all been there" (260) is not true for all audiences. In a taped interview with Philip Caputo, Kay Bonetti poses the question: "you say that your purpose is to use yourself and a few other men as examples to show that war can arouse a psychopathic violence in men of seemingly normal impulses. The question is when you use the words, show and describe, who are you showing, who are you describing for?" Caputo gives a detailed view into who he was writing for:

Just about everybody in the United States of America who wasn't there, that was my general audience. More specifically, I had in mind the antiwar protestors, the liberals, the left who had gotten, to my mind, awfully, awfully smug and morally self righteous about, not merely, I can understand because I eventually ended up sympathizing, as a political point of view, being outraged by the whole Vietnam policy, was one thing, and vehemently disagreeing is one thing, but when that outrage started to fall upon the heads of those of us who fought in the war. I was quite distressed because it was really being morally judged by people, who themselves, had never been tested at all, let alone tested to such a degree... Once you are put into an environment like that a logic takes over that you are almost powerless to resist. What do you do when you're suddenly faced with surviving in this jungle, where you don't know who is the enemy and who isn't and you are subjected to all the sheer physical horrors; lack of sleep, you're hungry, you're living in mud three to four weeks at a stretch, you're covered with jungle sores and the fact is that you are forgotten by everybody, the liberals, the left... What I wanted to do, what I know I succeeded in doing in this was I wanted someone, especially of smug self assurance, smugly believing in their own virtue and the strength of their own character to pick this thing up and when they close the book, when they turn the last page to say to themselves: had I been in that situation how would I have behaved. Just to ask themselves that question, that's what I want to do and I know I succeeded in doing that.

Caputo's account of his time in Vietnam offers the readers who were not in Vietnam, and also those who were politically against the war, an insight into war from the soldiers' perspective, a perspective they might not have seen before. Instead of the writerly, journalistic distance that readers feel while reading O'Brien and Herr, Caputo takes his different components and blends them together to form his narrative and show the reader dimensions of a soldier's life during war while also showing that under the circumstances of war the reader may have reacted the same way as Caputo did. In his interview with Kay Bonetti, Caputo discusses how he tried to start A Rumor of War as a novel and how he realized that it could only be a memoir;

I realized I had taken part in an experience that was characterized by a lot of episodic events ... I realized that I was

trying to write a traditional war novel from these chaotic events and that it wasn't working...It wasn't clicking for me, there was some unifying thread missing that I could never find.. The unifying thread is it's a dantesque journey from light into darkness, into a newer and clearer light, and that journey was the journey that my own spirit made in Vietnam and that pulled the whole thing together and I finally wrote it.

Since Caputo is able to give his readers a purposeful look at the soldiers in Vietnam, the readers are able to get a deeper understanding of the war than they might get from other authors like O'Brien and Herr. Caputo forms his components in an unyielding way that reveals to his audience his journey in Vietnam. In Caputo's work the reader tends to feel less unsettled because of the feeling that we have more of a credible view. Unlike O'Brien and Herr, whom we see as the writer and the journalist, Caputo gives us a sense of being the soldier rather than just a writer. This thesis will dwell on Caputo's stance as the soldier and his components and then look later at O'Brien and Herr as the writers and their fragmented works. Caputo's work is a non-fictional memoir which achieves its verisimilitude via a novelistic assembly of its components. Caputo started A Rumor of War as a novel but in keeping with his truthfulness and verity of his work he decided it worked better as a memoir. By writing his narrative as a memoir Caputo reveals to all readers, soldiers and nonsoldiers alike, the verity of his work. By looking at the individual components and how they are placed together, the reader recognizes the truthfulness of Caputo's memoir and in turn his audience feels as if they are taking his journey with him and the other soldiers. Caputo's work is significant when looking at Vietnam War Literature because the readers are able to grasp an understanding of war that they are not able to achieve from authors such as Herr and O'Brien.

## CHAPTER II

### COMPONENTS

#### **2.1 Language Component**

One of the most important components throughout the narrative is language. Three different types of language meld together to form Caputo's narrative; they will be classified as Standard English, Military language, and also grunt vocabulary. These three types of language, fused together, allow a similar reading experience for those who have, and do not have, a standard for recognizing authentic Vietnam War experience.

Standard English is used when Caputo is analyzing situations and his feelings about them. Standard English lets the reader connect with Caputo, not just as a soldier, but as the average person. Standard English is seen when he describes his home town of Westchester: "It had everything a suburb is supposed to have: sleek, new schools smelling of fresh plaster and floor wax, supermarkets full of Wonder Bread and Bird's Eye frozen peas" (4). This type of language is used so that the reader can relate to

Caputo since this is the language everyone is familiar with. The relatable aspect of Caputo's home town starts to bring the reader deeper into his memoir.

The second type of language, military, may not be familiar to every reader but Caputo successfully relays its meanings to the reader. This language is seen throughout the narrative but starts early on when Caputo goes to Basic Training. During Basic Training he starts to learn military jargon, for example he learns that a "helicopter assault was a vertical envelopment" (14). During training we see not only the physical change that comes over Caputo but also the change in his language. Instead of seeing the landscape, he was now calling it "terrain". The change in Caputo's language shows that he is becoming a soldier. By using the military language he gives verity to the experience and it also allows the reader to see the euphemistic tones that the military gives to desensitize the violence of war.

Military language is particularly noticeable in Caputo's narrative is when he becomes the "officer in charge of the dead". He is the one who has to fill out all the paper work on those killed in action (KIA), wounded (WIA), or missing (MIA). This is the first time that such a job is written about in a Vietnam War narrative. Caputo tells us that "All reports had to be written in that clinical, euphemistic language the military prefers to simple English. If, say, a marine had been shot through the guts, I could not write 'shot through the guts' or 'shot through the stomach'; no, I had to say 'GSW' (gunshot wound) 'through and through, abdomen.' Shrapnel wounds were called 'multiple fragment lacerations,' and the phrase for dismemberment, one of my very favorite phrases, was 'traumatic amputation' (166). This euphemistic language the military uses to gloss over the most gruesome images. Caputo provides the story of

Lieutenant Colonel Meyers who “stepped on a booby-trapped 155-mm shell. They did not find enough of him to fill a willy-peter bag, a waterproof sack a little larger than a shopping bag. In effect, Colonel Meyers had been disintegrated, but the official report read something like ‘traumatic amputation, both feet; traumatic amputation, both legs and arms; multiple lacerations to abdomen; through and through fragment wounds, head and chest.’ Then the notation ‘killed in action’”(167). The gruesome images that the soldiers see first hand, that the military language tries to gloss over, show why the psychological /emotional toll was so great on the soldiers, which will be discussed later. This language also demonstrates that the military tried to desensitize the situation, not only for the soldiers but the American public as well, by using euphemistic language.

In response to this desensitizing language Caputo uses his language to expose the violence and the emotions that come with war instead of glossing over the violence as military language does. Caputo writes: “Part of 3d platoon is stumbling down the steep bank; the rest are splashing across the river, yelling and shooting, charging wildly toward a hamlet on the other side. Sniper fire crackles, and a marine who is struggling to cut through the web of brush on the riverbank spins and goes down. Another rifleman calls for a corpsman. The action lasts two or three minutes at most, yet I have seen and heard everything with an unusual clarity, which seems to have something to do with the fact that I might have been shot at any moment” (109). The present participles that Caputo uses; stumbling, splashing, etc., brings out the realism of the situation the Marines were going through. This passage demonstrates the violence and the surge of emotions that comes with fighting in a war without using

any desensitizing language that the military might use to describe what was happening.

Since the soldiers become close because of everything they go through, they use a third type of language, grunt vocabulary, which is a mix of Standard English and military language. A grunt is a member of the infantry. This type of language is seen when the soldiers communicate with each other. An example of grunt vocabulary would be the term “wasted. In the war soldier’s slang for death was wasted” (220). This language conveys the tight bond between the soldiers, one that is only felt by soldiers who have fought together. It is the mixing of these three languages that conveys the bond to the reader. This bond is usually ineffable to any reader who has not fought in war since the bonds between soldiers come from the fear, violence, and gruesome images they face together, but Caputo allows his readers to comprehend this bond by showing the reader what the soldiers go through together in times of war.

In his article “Vocabularies of Experience,” J.T. Hansen discusses the three types of languages that are melded together to form Caputo’s narrative. Hansen explains how “The narratives bring coherence to the experience by the elegantly simple expedient of using vocabularies to differentiate the roles, values, and feelings the men successfully encounter. Concurrently, the reader develops fluency in the vocabularies and thus an increasingly sophisticated understanding of the experience” (Hansen 137). By using these three different types of languages throughout his narrative Caputo conveys to the reader the verity of the experience that the soldiers were going through. Hansen discusses that the three types of language “used in combination, they either clarify the internal dynamics of the experience or enable the

reader to draw inferences and formulate conclusions” (136). Hansen also points out that to read a Vietnam narrative it must be active reading since “the reader must achieve an accurate knowledge of the facts, however fragmentary, then formulate descriptive generalizations which must be tested and modified in the light of each new fragment” (Hansen 135). Since Caputo places his components together the reader comprehends what was happening in Vietnam and gets a sense of what the soldiers were experiencing. As Hansen correctly sums up:

The structure of the language imitates the structure of the experience. By mastering the languages, the reader is drawn ever more deeply into the Vietnam experience. While there is no substitute for having served in Vietnam, the experience is not in the final analysis merely hermetic. The extent of the reader’s understanding is constantly expanded, tested, and reinforced. This is particularly true of contexts in which the vocabularies are used in combination to dramatize the complexity of the more mysterious, ambiguous aspects of surviving a year in the combat zone (149).

When Caputo uses these languages together the reader is able to infer the verisimilitude of Caputo’s narrative. The three languages show the soldiers as regular citizens, warriors, and close friends. In his book Vietnam in American Literature, Philip Melling, obviously does not feel that Caputo’s language shows the soldier. He states: “With his blood and guts prose Caputo tends to shout too loud and too often to make himself heard” (64). As an example of this “blood and guts prose,” Caputo writes; “And the mutilation caused by modern weapons came as a shock...Nevertheless, we were sickened by the torn flesh, the viscera and splattered brains...They did, in fact, seem more dead. *Massacred* or *annihilated* might better describe what had happened to them” (128). What Melling calls “blood and guts prose” actually tends to enhance the reality of the violence in Vietnam. Caputo uses all three



languages to show the distinct mixture of language used by the soldiers. The reader comprehends the veracity of the soldier's life in Vietnam because Caputo includes Standard English along with the grunt vocabulary.

A passage that uses Caputo's different languages and allows the reader to grasp the verity of Caputo's work is at the end of his work.

The experience of being under heavy fire is like suffocating; air suddenly becomes as lethal as a poison gas, its very molecules seem to be composed of pieces of lead flying at two thousand miles an hour. The bullets hissed and cracked over my head, and I yelled-no screamed- Allen! I'm pinned down. Pour it on 'em, goddamnit. Your right front, around the bend. POUR IT ON 'EM GODDAMNIT. The three marines managed to sound like a small army, with Crowe's shotgun roaring loudly. Then came the flat, dull blasts of 40-millimeters as Allen laid down a barrage with his grenade launcher (265).

Caputo uses all three of his languages in this passage and when he mixes all of these languages the reader deeply identifies with the soldiers. In Standard English, he discusses how it was to be under fire. In grunt language, he starts screaming at the soldiers to "Pour it on 'em." In military language, shortly thereafter, he explains the sounds of the military weapons. The mixture of languages allows Caputo's audience to infer the verity of his work. This mixing of languages is discussed by Mikhail Bakhtin using the term heteroglossia, meaning more than one voice in a work. Bakhtin discusses heteroglossia in terms of the novel but his thoughts on language also apply to Caputo's work of nonfiction. Bakhtin discusses how "all languages of heteroglossia are specific points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words" (676). Individually, Caputo's three languages produce different aspects of Caputo's world as a soldier and also as a civilian, but when placed together infers a

deeper understanding into Caputo's life during war. Caputo places his languages harmoniously together to cause an eye opening effect on the reader.

## **2.2 "The Two Caputo's"**

While looking at Caputo's components throughout the narrative it is important to look at what we might call "the two Caputo's". One Caputo is a young marine who fights in Vietnam and exists in the narrative as a character and the other Caputo who has lived through Vietnam and is looking back at his experience as the narrator of A Rumor of War. Caputo has an apparently effortless way to weave his two selves together. In Walking Point, Thomas Myers discusses these two Caputo's:

Caputo consistently presents two figures in the memoir: the warrior in the process of historical transformation and the finished product, a carefully controlled narrative voice that presents evidence and finally passes judgment on his former persona. The reader confronts a double image, a chastened Caputo chronicling the passage of an immature but developing one, one dramatic monologue in constant tension with the other. Offering his thoughts, feelings, and actions in the historical context in which they occurred, he also provides a wrenching, often polemical gloss of their significance. As Caputo offers the original data and refracts them through his new perceptions, the reader is encouraged to judge speakers, the romantic warrior but also the transformed confessor of the original sins. (92).

While the reader does confront the double image of Caputo; the "dramatic monologues" are not in constant tension with each other but instead meld together to offer a perspective that shows the verity of Caputo's narrative. The "two Caputo's" represent the young marine growing into the Caputo who is writing the narrative and

also the Caputo who remembers himself during this time. The effect is one that displays the toll Vietnam has taken on the soldiers in the war but also what Caputo now sees of the change within himself since the war.

### **2.3 Psychological Toll, Flashbacks, Dreams and History**

Throughout his narrative Caputo switches seamlessly from narrating his own psychological reaction to the war as he sees it inwardly to narrating the war from an objective look at a seemingly national perspective of history. In the beginning of the narrative Caputo provides a little history about his battalion: “One –Three was a ‘transplacement’ battalion, part of a unit- rotation system used by the Marine Corps between the Korean and Vietnam wars to maintain both the proficiency and the spirit of its Pacific forces”(32). In Walking Point, Thomas Myers explains that “Caputo goes to Vietnam at the very moment the American involvement is metamorphosing from the advisory period of Green Beret romanticism to a full combat role, the war of attrition that would grind on for the next eight years”( 93). Caputo’s unit was one of the first to be deployed to Vietnam and they believed that the war would be won fairly quickly and easily; unfortunately, that was not to be the case. The soldiers are fighting in a war that causes a deep psychological toll. Caputo’s worst psychological state is in part two of the memoir, “The Officer in Charge of the Dead”.

As the “officer in charge of the dead” he has to record not only those who have died but he also has to see many of the dead bodies. Caputo reveals how he started to feel:

The war was beginning to take a psychological toll. Malaria and gunshot and shrapnel wounds continued to account for most of our losses, but in the late summer the phrases *acute anxiety reaction* and *acute depressive reaction* started to appear on the sick-and-injured report sent out each morning by the division hospital. To some degree, many of us began to suffer “anxiety” and “depressive” reactions. I noticed, in myself and in other men, a tendency to fall into black, gloomy moods and then to explode out of them in fits of bitterness and rage. It was partly caused by grief, grief over the death of friends... It made me feel guilty to think about them, guilty about my own comparatively safe life on the staff, guiltier still about being the one who had translated their deaths into numbers on a scoreboard. I had acquired a hatred for the scoreboard. It symbolized everything I despised about the staff, the obsession with statistics, the indifference toward the tragedy of death; and because I was on the staff, I despised myself (201-202).

This passage expresses the heightened displacement of emotions that most soldiers felt in Vietnam. Caputo expresses his individual, weakened sense of emotion as well as showing the verity of his narrative by conveying how the war began to emotionally affect the soldiers. Caputo reveals the many emotions that the soldiers have to deal with, from depressed to rage, to guilt for being alive. These many emotions profoundly demonstrate the psychological toll the soldier’s had to deal with at any given time.

The psychological toll of being the “officer in charge of the dead” is really honestly established when Caputo is forced to look at the dead bodies of some American soldiers. That night Caputo has a very gruesome, haunting dream;

That night, I was given command of a new platoon. They stood in formation in the rain, three ranks deep. I stood front and center, facing them. Devin, Lockhart, and Bryce were in the first rank, Bryce standing on his one good leg, next to him the faceless Devlin, and then Lockhart with his bruised eye sockets bulging. Sullivan was there too, and Reasoner and all the others, all of them dead except me, the officer in charge of the dead. I was the only one alive and whole, and when I commanded, “Platoon, rye-eet FACE! Sliiiiing HARMS! For-WARD HARCH!” they faced right, slung their rifles, and began to march. They

marched along, my platoon of crippled corpses, hopping along on the stumps of their legs, swinging the stumps of their arms, keeping perfect time while I counted cadence. I was proud of them, disciplined soldiers to and beyond the end. They stayed in step even in death” (199).

This gruesome dream shows just how much the death of his comrades has affected Caputo. Caputo horridly describes the soldiers in his dream to grant the reader access into his gruesome dream that is brought on by the violence and death seen all around him. Even when Caputo is awake this dream still haunts him and he even starts to see those that are alive as they would look in death. In his work Vietnam in American Literature, Philip Melling contends “Caputo’s weakness is a tendency to overstate the brutality and adventurism of Vietnam” (63). Melling believes that “The need to portray the horror of Vietnam as exceptional and unprecedented limits the writer’s capacity for realism” (63). Caputo uses the brutality and horror of war to construct the verity of his narrative. The graphic depiction of the violence of war enables soldiers and nonsoldiers to experience Caputo’s work the same way, effectively eliminating any barriers between soldiers and nonsoldiers, while also allowing any war protesters to empathize with the soldiers.

Caputo switches from his inward emotional toll to discussing the historical points of the war when he discusses the casualty rate during this time;

It had become a different war. The casualty rate had increased enough to make death and maiming seem commonplace. In its first two months, between mid-September and mid-November, the battalion took two hundred and forty-nine casualties. Attrition. The attrition the enemy inflicted on us and that which we inflicted on ourselves. The Huey gunship that flew in to give fire support to a company pinned down in ambush and ended up giving fire support to the VC by strafing the marines. The troop- carrying helicopter that went down in a monsoon storm... Altogether I wrote an average of seventy-five or eighty reports a week. It became part of my daily routine, as monotonous as the steadily

falling rain; and soon those names meant no more to me than the names in a phone book (218).

In this same section of the memoir Caputo has to record a name of someone who he knew well, Walter Levy. Caputo then has “An image of Levy smiling... He was standing with his back against a wall, his hands in his pockets. There was a jukebox next to him. Levy took out his pipe, lit it, and bent down to say something to me... That was in Georgetown, a long time ago, before Vietnam” (221). Caputo’s flashback allows the reader to relate to the soldier’s on a more personal level. This passage breaks down the barrier between soldier and nonsoldier since the reader is able to see Levy as they would someone they know.

Since the death rate would only get worse Caputo discusses what the American society was feeling about the Vietnam War at the time this memoir was published; “Its very name is a curse. There are no monuments to its heroes, no statues in small-town squares and city parks, no plaques, nor public wreaths, nor memorials... They would make it harder for your country to sink into the amnesia for which it longs” (224). It is interesting to see a soldier’s perspective of what his own country feels about what he had to fight in. Even though now we do have memorials it is interesting to note how upset the soldiers had to feel about being forgotten for the things they fought for. It is also interesting to see the “two Caputo’s” here as well. We see the young Caputo who signed up for war to prove himself and the older Caputo who is wishing he knew then what he knows now about war. Even though there is the older Caputo looking back the reader never feels the writerly distance we feel with O’Brien and Herr. Caputo has the ability to make the reader feel as if they are fighting alongside the soldiers while Herr and O’Brien never seem to take us with them. With O’Brien and Herr there is the

feeling that we are always on the outside looking in while Caputo's artfully placed components pull us in with him.

Later on in the memoir, when Caputo asks to be transferred to a line company in 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion he discusses his reasons for wanting to go back into the field; "I felt useless and a little guilty about living in relative safety while other men risked their lives... The fear of madness was another motive. The hallucination I had had that day in the mess, of seeing Mora and Harrison prefigured in death, had become a constant, waking nightmare. I had begun to see almost everyone as they would look in death, including myself" (230). Throughout his time in the line company Caputo goes through feelings of nothingness and then feelings of a cramping fear to an intense hatred of the enemy. At one point in the narrative the line company destroys a village; afterward Caputo describes what he felt:

I felt sick enough about it all, sick of war, sick of what war was doing to us, sick of myself. Looking at the embers below, at the skeletons of the houses, a guilt weighed down on me as heavily as the heaviest pack I had ever carried. It was not only the senseless obliteration of Ha Na that disturbed me, but the dark, destructive emotions I had felt throughout the battle, almost from the moment the enemy mortars started to fall: urges to destroy that seemed to rise from the fear of being destroyed myself. I had enjoyed the killing of the VietCong who had run out of the tree line. Strangest of all had been the sensation of watching myself in a movie. One part of me was doing something while the other part watched from a distance, shocked by the things it saw, yet powerless to stop them from happening (305-306).

Caputo includes passages such as these so that the reader infers a sense of the emotional toll the war had on the soldier's minds as they went through battle. It is easy to see that Caputo is experiencing very hard times and doesn't understand all of the feelings that he is experiencing by being in war. Unfortunately, the emotional toll only deepens as the war goes on.

The retaliation that Caputo so desperately wants against the enemy comes to a head when he sends out a patrol to go and capture some men from a village. Caputo sends out the patrol even though he knows that Allen, one of the men on the patrol, would kill them. Caputo tells us; “I knew he was going to kill those men on the slightest pretext...It was my secret and savage desire that the two men die” (317). While on patrol Allen does exactly what Caputo secretly wanted him to do, he kills one of the men. Caputo then sees that Allen has killed the wrong person; he has killed an innocent boy. After this incident, Caputo and the men on the patrol are charged with murder. Caputo feels a bit outraged that he is being charged with a crime since “They had taught us to kill and had told us to kill and now they were going to court – martial us for killing” (322). Caputo’s hatred and fear had caused him to do something that he never thought he would do. The killing of the young boy is one instance that causes the reader to wonder what they would have done under the same circumstance, something that Caputo wanted the reader to do. In the end he is not charged with anything but he still feels outrage and guilt at what he had done during the war.

Caputo places his components together to give the reader the chance to live vicariously through the young soldiers. An example of fusing together psychological, language and history components is seen in this passage;

Some combat veterans may think that I am making too much of a single casualty. Later, I was to see fairly active fighting, and I know that experiencing heavy or constant losses tends to diminish the significance of one individual death. But at the time we lost Sullivan, casualties were still light; it was the “expeditionary” period of the war, a period that lasted roughly from March to September 1965... Perhaps, too, we were less emotionally prepared for death and wounds than those who came later; the men who fought in Vietnam at this time had joined the service in peacetime, before the toll built up to a daily announcement. A small statistic illustrates



what I mean: One-Three's total losses between March and August of 1965 amounted to about one hundred and ten killed and wounded...But most important, in this early period the men in One-Three were very close to one another. They had been together for years and assumed they would remain together until the end of their enlistments. Seargent Sullivan's death shattered that assumption. It upset the sense of unity and stability that had pervaded life in the battalion (Caputo 163).

The military language and standard language are fused together so that Caputo can demonstrate the psychological toll the violence of war had on the soldiers. The military language is seen when Caputo uses terms such as "casualties" and "the expeditionary period". This passage also conveys to the reader what was happening at the beginning of the Vietnam War and how the soldiers in Caputo's narrative were the first to go over to fight before the death toll began to rise. This passage also shows the Caputo who is looking back and realizing the true emotional impact death had on him and One-Three. The voice of Caputo looking back is seen as he discusses the shattered unity in the battalion. When Caputo fuses these three components together we get a look at Vietnam in a different way, emotionally and historically.

Another example of the fusing of components is one where history is fused with emotional toll:

The regiment's mood began to match the weather. We were along way from the despair that afflicted American soldiers in the closing years of the war, but we had also traveled some emotional distance from the cheery confidence of eight months before. The mood was sardonic, fatalistic, and melancholy. I could hear it in our black jokes: 'Hey Billy, your going on patrol today. If you get your legs blown off can I have your boots?' I could hear it in the songs we sang. Some were versions of maudlin country-and – western tunes like 'Detroit City,' the refrain of which expressed every rifleman's hope: I wanna go home, I wanna go home,O I wanna go home(227).

Caputo realizes that those soldiers who fought later in the war had a more violent time, filled with despair, but he also shows that the soldiers who were there at this time underwent a sad emotional distance from what we saw previously in his narrative.

Caputo seamlessly switches back and forth between the subjective view of his psychological state and his objective view of our nation's history. Caputo uses this to give us some insight into three different operations that happened in Vietnam during the time of his deployment there. Operation Rolling Thunder was a bombing campaign launched by the American government after the Viet Cong had attacked an American air base. Another operation that Caputo gives us the most insight into was Operation Blast Out:

Operation Blast Out began and ended in early August. Three thousand marines and ARVN soldiers, supported by tanks, artillery, planes, and the six-inch guns of a U. S. Navy cruiser, managed to kill two dozen Viet Cong in three days. Even those two dozen died hard. They holed up in a complex of caves and bunkers near the Song Yen River. In scenes reminiscent of the mopping-up operations against the Japanese, the marines and ARVN fought the enemy from cave to cave, bunker to bunker, blowing them out with grenades and satchel charges (203).

This scene not only demonstrates what the operations were like during the Vietnam War but also discusses the same technique that had to be used in a past war. Another operation that Caputo mentions is Operation Harvest Moon. He discusses how there were so many wounded on our side but “because the enemy had lost the equivalent of a battalion, all our generals agreed that the operation had been a great success” (259). It just shows the irony of war: so many of ours were wounded but that doesn't matter to those higher up in the War. Those that were higher up in the military were able to use euphemistic language to transform the mass casualties into a depersonalized account of victory. The last operation that Caputo mentions is Operation Long Lance.

It would be only the second night helicopter assault in history. During this operation Caputo's platoon burn down a village.

## **2.4 Fragmented Scenes**

After Operation Long Lance, Caputo gives the reader fragmented scenes that are like looking through a camera. Even though most of Caputo's narrative is cohesively placed together to form his memoir there are always exceptions to the rules, such as these fragmented scenes. These scenes convey how terrible the war could be and also the affects it had on the soldiers. Caputo adds these photographic scenes because this was how Caputo sees his time in Vietnam in his memory. He tells Kay Bonetti; "The easiest thing was my memory alone, the experience took place early enough in my life and was so intense and vivid, that I could recall things almost as though they had been photographed." Caputo's "photographic" memories allow the reader to get to an understanding of the soldiers daily lives in Vietnam. While Caputo was able to make his narrative cohesive, these scenes are there to remind us that the war was chaotic, that so many things were happening to the soldiers during their time in Vietnam.

The first fragmented scenes demonstrate the ugly, violent elements of war. Caputo includes "shots of patrols coming back diminished by two or three or half a dozen men" (312). In one scene there is a soldier who was hit by a mine; "He is lying on his back in the rain, wrapped in scarlet ribbons of his own blood" (313). These fragments demonstrate the ugliness of war. In the next fragments Caputo demonstrates how the war has affected the soldiers. A corporal follows a blood trail and "the enemy turns his face toward his pursuer, perhaps to surrender, perhaps to beg for mercy. The

corporal walks up to him and casually shoots him in the head” (313). The violence of war is conveyed further by the story of a soldier who kills a woman and does not even realize what he is doing until he has killed her. This fragmented part of Caputo’s narrative allows the reader to remember that War is a chaotic time.

Scattered bits of information also seem to be important to Caputo’s story. Caputo discusses how “mines and booby traps transform that friendly, familiar earth into a thing of menace...It was not warfare. It was murder. We could not fight against the Viet Cong mines...we had begun to feel more like victims than soldiers. So we were ready for a battle, a traditional, set-piece battle against regular soldiers like ourselves” (288). This informs us that this war is different than any we fought before. The mines were something that the soldiers could not fight against.

Other than the above exceptions, Caputo seamlessly sews together his components to form a compact narrative. By putting these components together Caputo provides the reader with the evidence of a soldier’s life in Vietnam; the emotional tolls, the violence, and the language that the soldiers used. Caputo gives us a different perspective that had not previously been written about and that is being the one who records those that are killed, wounded and missing. This perspective gives the narrative an unprecedented look at a job that many would not think about. When all of these components are placed so cohesively together it makes his life and the lives of the other soldiers so much more intense and real, something that the reader might not feel if Caputo’s narrative was as fragmented as some of the other Vietnam writers. Caputo is able to convey all the dimensions of war and he does so by fusing his components cohesively together while O’Brien and Herr leave their works

fragmented and ragged. Caputo's narrative is unique in the sense that it supplies readers of Vietnam War Literature with more of an understanding of a soldier's life during war, something that authors such as Herr and O'Brien were not able to accomplish as convincingly with their works. Caputo gives his readers, soldiers and nonsoldiers alike, a more authentic view of what war was for the soldiers who risked their lives there.

CHAPTER III  
VIETNAM WAR WRITERS

**3.1 Tim O'Brien**

While Caputo fuses components together toward cohesiveness, readers of O'Brien encounter a contrasting, deliberately ragged fragmentation. In his work of fiction, The Things They Carried, Tim O'Brien relies on fragmentation to show the chaos that was the war. O'Brien's story starts off with descriptions of the things that each character is carrying throughout his tour in Vietnam, but throughout these descriptions there are short narrative fragments that interrupt the list of things the soldiers were carrying. After this first story, which is designed to introduce the main characters in the rest of the stories and also to show their different personalities, there is a fragmented pattern of the stories referring back and forth to other stories and characters, while being interrupted by the narrator, who just happens to be a 43 year old named Tim O'Brien. O'Brien also fragments his work of fiction by jumping back and forth between Vietnam and stateside. O'Brien's work is so fragmented that the reader has a very frustrating time trying to understand what to believe whereas Philip

Caputo is able to form his components together so the reader is able to grasp an understanding of war from Caputo's narrative.

In Tim O'Brien's third story, titled *Spin*, we get different memories about the characters. Some of the fragments refer back and forth to other stories, such as, "A red clay trail outside the village of My Khe. A hand grenade. A slim, dead, dainty young man of about twenty. Kiowa saying, "No choice, Tim. What else could you do?"(37). This memory refers to three other stories in the work of fiction. The first story that discusses the killing of this man by Tim is titled *The Man I Killed*. In this story he gives a dead Vietnam soldier a life story. This story is hard to relate to since we know that he has never met the man and it is quite obvious that Tim feels badly about killing him. The man whom Tim killed comes up a second time in the next story, titled *Ambush*. In this part of the story the man was killed by a grenade that Tim had thrown. We also have the understanding that he feels terrible about what he had to do. In the story titled *Good Form* the dead man is presented again. This is where the story gets a little frustrating; Tim reveals that he did not kill the man but he was present for his death. After we have seen this dead man three times O'Brien informs the reader that his story is not real, none of it happened. Then O'Brien explains the "happening truth," which is that there were many dead bodies but he was too young to look and then we get the "story truth," which is the story of him killing the man. All of this back and forth about maybe he did kill the man, but he really didn't, leaves the reader feeling frustrated about what to believe in O'Brien's writing. When O'Brien gives us these conflicting stories the reader tends to stop trying to understand what really

happened and consequently the reader never really connects a meaning or understanding to what might have happened in Vietnam to these soldiers.

Unlike Caputo, O'Brien gives the reader the experience of the writer looking back and writing about Vietnam instead of seeing him as the soldier writing about his experiences. Since O'Brien keeps his work fragmented the reader feels that writerly technique of emotional distance that we do not feel in Caputo's work. In his article, "The Undying Uncertainty of the Narrator in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*", Steven Kaplan discusses this fragmented back and forth: "By constantly involving and then re-involving the reader in the task of determining what 'actually' happened in a given situation, in a story, and by forcing the reader to experience the impossibility of ever knowing with any certainty what actually happened, O'Brien liberates himself from the lonesome responsibility of remembering and trying to understand events"(51). This is true in the sense that O'Brien does not have to remember anything exactly as it was because he wants the reader not to be sure of what they are reading and also not to be active in understanding it. By leaving his work fragmented O'Brien does not ask the reader to comprehend a soldier's life but shows us a writer who is looking back and writing about his experience. Since O'Brien is the writer looking back he is able to feel free to elaborate the truth of Vietnam as he goes along, whereas Caputo enhances the realism of his narrative by appearing to give voice to the soldiers, experiencing and gruesomely describing the war, seemingly as it happened.

Unlike Caputo, who provides only one version of his story; O'Brien fragments his work of fiction in that he conveys many versions of the same story, for example,



the story of how Curt Lemon died. There are six different versions. When O'Brien gives all these different versions of the same story the reader again feels that maybe none of O'Brien's stories are true, and the reader does not get the feeling of a cohesive story about Vietnam and the soldiers fighting there. In the chapter titled *How to Tell a True War Story*, O'Brien discusses Rat's friend who is dead. Then later in the story the reader is informed that his name is Curt Lemon and the extensive story of how he died. O'Brien eventually writes, "here's what actually happened" (78) and gives the reader a short version of what happened to Lemon and also Rat's reaction to Lemon's death. The seriousness of Curt Lemon's death is shattered with Jensen's singing as they clean up the body parts of Lemon. O'Brien does not give the reader the whole story at once because he wants the reader to see and feel the war as fragmented and chaotic. In an Interview with Patrick Hicks, Tim O'Brien is asked "You may not feel that you have something to teach your readers but do you feel that your readers want to learn something?"(89)O'Brien comments, "I think they hope they will, but that hope is frustrated in all my books by my adamant refusal to fulfill that need" (89). This shows that O'Brien does not want his reader to learn about what it was like to fight in Vietnam and that may also be why his fiction is kept so fragmented.O'Brien's work seems more of a way for him to let go of some of the emotional weight brought on by the war than as a way for the reader to experience and understand the war through O'Brien's work.

O'Brien is not able to show the verity of his work like Caputo does is because some of his stories he did not witness first hand. Unlike Caputo, who only shows us things that happened to him first hand, O'Brien's story titled *Sweetheart of the Song*

*Tra Bong*, is one that he heard from Rat. What is ironic in the story is that Rat did not stay around long enough to find out what really happened to Fossie's girlfriend; that part was told to Rat by someone else. Another story that was told by someone else is the story of Rat shooting himself in the foot so that he could get out of Vietnam. By adding these stories and saying that he only heard about them, O'Brien makes the reader wonder what may be true throughout the whole work. While O'Brien's work shows how hard the war must be to write about for those that have lived through it, O'Brien's deliberate fragmentation leaves the reader wondering if any of O'Brien's stories are true and also feeling the writerly distance that O'Brien displays in his work.

### **3.2 Michael Herr**

While his narrative style is quite different from Caputo's, another author whose fragmented style leaves the reader trying to piece things together is Michael Herr. In his narrative, Dispatches, Michael Herr gives us a reporter's look at the Vietnam War while Caputo gives us a soldier's view. Herr is not fighting in the war; he is a correspondent for it. Herr gives us stories that he has heard from other soldiers or from what he has seen himself. Herr does not kill anybody and he volunteers to be in Vietnam. Herr's narrative is fragmented but is not placed in a cohesive fashion. The reader has to piece together his scattered statements and form some understanding of the Vietnam War. To look at Herr's narrative it would be helpful to look at his chapters.

The first chapter, *Breathing In*, starts off with an old map on the wall in Saigon. This is meant to show that until the Vietnam War, America did not really know anything about Vietnam. Herr uses italicized stories to represent to the reader what

may be important during Vietnam. One italicized story is about the 173<sup>rd</sup> and how they held services for their dead. They arranged the dead men's boots in formation. Herr gives us the soldier's response to such a service: "A lot of people there that day accepted the boots as solemn symbols and went into deep prayer. Others stood around watching with grudging respect, others photographed it and some just thought it was a lot of bitter bullshit"( 23). This is an important story that conveys the feelings of the soldiers when paying tribute to the dead, and how they did pay tribute, but this story is mixed in with other stories and is only deemed more important because Herr chose to italicize it.

Herr's stories demonstrate what it was like to be in Vietnam but assumptions have to be made about what is really important. Herr tells story after story without pausing to look at the emotional impact of the story. For example, Herr tells the story of a soldier who "hadn't been anything but tired and scared for six months and he'd lost a lot, mostly people, and seen far too much, but he was breathing in and breathing out" ( 16). Unlike Caputo, Herr does not pause to reflect on the emotional impact of the soldier's life in Vietnam; instead Herr goes directly into how he did not want to get on a chopper because it was full of the dead. Herr's fragments do not form a cohesive narrative; he lets them stay choppy and makes the reader infer any kind of meaning they can out of them.

In her article, "The Lust of the Eye", Maria Bonn contends that "Herr's stylistically fragmented narrative contains artistically juxtaposed repeated journeys, great and small, from innocence to experience" (Bonn 29). Herr's narrative is meant to be fragmented to show us his version of what Vietnam was like. Herr's Vietnam

would be more fragmented because he never had to stay in one place and fight; he was able to see much more of Vietnam and the violence that was happening there. Herr provides the reporter's perspective, while O'Brien provides the writer's perspective and it is not until we read Caputo's narrative that we finally get the soldier's perspective. Since we get the other perspectives from Herr and O'Brien we also get that writerly distance from both authors that we do not get from Caputo. Bonn also discusses how Herr uses certain techniques; "dramatic scenes, full dialogue, complex point of view, interior dialogue" (Bonn 30) to get his memoir to be fragmented but at the same time truthful and understandable. Bonn also discusses how Herr uses "*Dispatches* as a forum from which the voices of the many combatants that he comes to know can be heard" (Bonn 34). Herr also gives life to the combatants by using their language.

While Caputo's narrative is quite different than Herr's, one thing they do have in common is their use of more than one type of language. While Caputo uses three different types, Herr only uses two. He uses the grunt's vocabulary and military language. Most of Herr's narrative seems to be in the grunt vocabulary that he has heard the grunts use. He uses this type of language to show what was going on in a soldier's perspective. Using Bakhtin's conception of double languages the use of the grunts language, which is mixed with generational language of the time, is a positive experience which gives voice to those who during war really had no voice. In his article, "Style in *Dispatches*: Heteroglossia and Michael Herr's Break with Conventional Journalism", Matthew Stewart refers to this as getting a "grunt's eye view of Vietnam, evidently believing that the most important aspects of war resided in

the lower echelon, in the mundane fright and grind of the combat GI”(192). The most important facts do reside with the grunts but the soldier’s lives seem to be anything but mundane. Herr also makes it clear that grunt language is the language that gets us closer to the faces of those that fought in Vietnam than in the language of those who merely informed us of Vietnam.

The first chapter is quite aptly named *Breathing In* because we are seeing what is truly going on in Vietnam; we are just starting to breathe in and discover what Vietnam is about and also what Herr feels about Vietnam. Herr feels disgust for some of the things that he has seen but also can feel sympathy for the soldiers, or beauty in the areas around him. Herr is able to see many sides of an ugly war and this may be why his work is fragmented instead of cohesive. He is able to see more areas of the war than a grunt fighting in it would be able to see.

The next chapter named *Hell Sucks* does show us only the hellish side of the war in this short chapter. Herr starts off by showing us what Saigon looks like after the curfew is instated; “By 2:30 each day Saigon looked like the final reel of *On the Beach*, a desolate city whose long avenues held nothing but refuse, windblown papers, small distinct piles of human excrement and the dead flowers and spent firecracker casings of the Lunar New Year” (Herr 70). Herr’s narrative abruptly switches to describing a breakdown, then a battalion watching in despair as Marines die—all efficiently evoking the “hell” that was Vietnam.

The next chapter, *Khe Sanh*, is the only one that does not feel as fragmented because everything happened at this one place. Herr conveys three different aspects of Vietnam in this chapter. The Marine deeply in shock and afraid to go home; the focus

on terrain that keeps the NVA troops hidden and survivors of a deadly war that are left insane from the violence they have witnessed. This seriousness is then abruptly fractured by Mayhew and Day Tripper, who break up the seriousness with comedic tones when Mayhew starts singing the Oscar Myer wiener song.

The next chapter, *Illumination Rounds*, slips right back into fragmented stories. Unlike Caputo who tells one cohesive story, Herr hurls these brief stories at us one right after the other with no connection other than the fact that they all happened in Vietnam. I feel that Herr tells us these brief stories because they were part of the lives of the grunts whom he met throughout his time in Vietnam. These fragmented stories are meant to illuminate Vietnam for those of us who were not there. Herr's life with the grunts was fragmented as he was coming and going but these stories stayed with him because they show things that happened to actual soldiers.

The next chapter, *Colleagues*, is one where Herr really seems to pour out his emotions and he does so by giving us fragmented stories about colleagues that were also with him in Vietnam, such as Sean Flynn and Dana Stone. Herr demonstrates what the Marines felt about having correspondents around; some of them thought they were brave while other Marines had an intense hatred for them. This was an interesting aspect to see since we do not get any of this view in O'Brien or Caputo. It was interesting to see how the Marines wanted Herr to tell it like it really was. Matthew Stewart notes that "By the end of the section entitled "Colleagues," Herr has made it overtly clear that his sense of writerly mission is inextricably bound together with the belief that he must serve as prolocutor for the grunts"(192). I believe that this may be another reason why Herr's narrative is fragmented; he wanted to make sure

that he felt that he was reporting it like it was for the men who he saw fight in Vietnam.

The last chapter, *Breathing Out*, is Herr finally going home. We get some fragmented stories and then it ends with his famous line, “Vietnam Vietnam Vietnam, we’ve all been there” (260). This last chapter feels like it was Herr’s way of letting go of all the emotions associated with Vietnam. In his Interview with Eric James Schroeder, Herr was asked; “How would you compare what O’Brien and Stone are doing with the novel form to what you’re doing in *Dispatches*?”(39) Herr comments, “We were all trying to find a form and an expression for a very extreme experience that all three of us lived through. We had to find this in order to save our lives... You can’t carry it around with you because it’s just too heavy”(39). This last chapter is his way of saying goodbye to some of that heavy burden. While he did not fight there he did see some horrific things and he volunteered for it. Herr seems to keep his narrative fragmented because that is how he saw the war, in chaotic fragments. He was able to come and go from the war, while writers like Caputo had no choice but to stay and fight.

In his narrative, *A Rumor of War*, Philip Caputo presents all readers, veterans and non-veterans alike, with a deeper level of understanding than Herr or O’Brien; by taking all of his components and placing them cohesively together. The components, when placed together, convey the verisimilitude of Caputo’s work. Caputo’s work gives his readers a deeper understanding of war that they could not achieve by reading Herr and O’Brien; who leave their work ragged and fragmented. Caputo takes different components; language, psychological/emotional toll, dream sequences and other

components, and places them together in a cohesive fashion to convey the verisimilitude of his narrative.



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