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Conflict Then; Trauma Now: Reading Vietnam Across the Decades in American Comics

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Abstract:

This paper will consider the shift in representations of the Vietnam War in American comics, concentrating specifically on the shift from gung-ho violence and patriotism to nuanced personal narratives of trauma and the psychological impact of conflict. I will compare and contrast three comics series: *The 'Nam*, a Marvel series that ran from 1986 to 1993; *The Punisher Invades 'The 'Nam*, a cross-over series that comprises two arcs over five issues in 1990 and 1992; and Garth Ennis & Darick Robertson's *Punisher: Born* (2003), an origin story that positions trauma as a survival tool within theatre. Vietnam as a conflict event and a cultural touchstone has affected the way we view violence in the 21st century. I discuss how comics has measured and represented the shift in positioning of violence and conflict from earlier wars through Vietnam to the present day. I close by asking to what extent our tools and tropes for representation of violence have changed and ask if there remain some last strands of continuity from pre-Vietnam violence texts.

Author Biography:

Dr Harriet Earle is a lecturer in English at Sheffield Hallam University and researcher in American comics, literature, and popular culture. She has a PhD in American Comics from Keele University (completed 2014) and her first monograph about conflict trauma and comics post-Vietnam was released in July 2017 by the University Press of Mississippi. She has published across the field of comics and popular culture studies, with recent publications in *The Journal of Popular Culture* and *Film International*. Dr Earle sits on the editorial board of *Comics Forum*.

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All representations of Vietnam are bound up in two inalienable truths: that America was not prepared for the war they were rushing into, spurred on by fear of the Domino Effect, and, more crucially, that they ultimately did not win. This article considers how these two facts affect the way that the war is represented in American mainstream comics.¹ I start by outlining a brief history of war and conflict comics, with a special focus on mainstream comics, before discussing the rise of trauma as a representative lens for conflict in the wake of Vietnam. I then perform close analytical readings of three texts: *The 'Nam* (a series from 1986 to 1993); cross-over arcs *The Punisher Invades The 'Nam* (1990 and 1992); and Garth Ennis & Darick Robertson's *The Punisher: Born* (2003). I close by tying together the strands of this article and briefly posit how these ideas of conflict and representation may develop in the future.

On the 30th April 1975, troops of the People's Army of Vietnam (also known as the North Vietnamese Army or NVA) entered the city of Saigon and raised the Viet Cong flag above the Independence Palace. The Fall of Saigon marked the final defeat of US and ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) troops and the *de facto* end of the Vietnam War.² In the twenty years of the conflict, over 1.3 million individuals died, at least 600,000 of them civilians; nearly 159,000 American servicemen were killed in theatre. American involvement in Vietnam was a contentious issue, but even before the beginning of major US involvement there was opposition and large numbers eligible men claimed exemptions by attending college or simply evaded the draft. According to Lurch and Sperlich's 1973 study in *The Western Political Quarterly*, by 1967 a majority of Americans were against the war in Vietnam; this position was only intensified by events such as the Kent State Shooting in 1970.

It is Vietnam's dubious distinction of being one of the first televised wars that provided a wealth of fuel for the anti-war fire that raged throughout the duration of the conflict and has provided a framework for anti-war debate ever since; viewers in the USA could see the action beamed into their living rooms with a speed and vibrancy unparalleled in conflict journalism. Not only did this raise questions of how the press operates as a tool for both governmental propaganda and liberal whistleblowing but the constant, rolling stream of horrific images of both military and civilian casualties, devastated landscapes and violence did nothing to strengthen domestic support or provide clear arguments for US involvement. The horror of the conflict was not new but the fact that it was a guerrilla war, for which the US was not prepared, fought by young, immature soldiers and widely broadcast in daily installations, makes the events in Vietnam unique.

War comics are by no means a new genre; conflict has been an enduring theme in comics for as long as the mainstream has been in print. The first issue of Marvel's *Captain America Comics* in March 1941 depicted Cap punching Hitler in the jaw. However, as Joseph Witek notes, 'war comic books in America generally have been marginal to a field dominated by other genres such as adventure, western, crime, horror, and, pre-eminently, superhero comics' (Witek 2006: 37). It was only after the Second World War that series concentrating specifically on war stories appeared, including the long-running titles *Our Army at War* (DC, August 1952 to February 1977), *Fightin' Army* (Charlton Comics, January 1956 to November 1984) and *Sgt. Fury and his Howling Commandos* (Marvel, May 1963 to December 1981). These series were bold in their gung-ho depictions of conflict, with manly camaraderie and much of the glorification that had characterised earlier representations of conflict across popular forms. The implementation of the Comics Code Authority in 1956 placed austere regulations on acceptable themes and word usage, as well as what could and could not be shown in the books

themselves; as such, bold depictions of Manichean war stories with clear-cut heroes remained popular.

In contrast, series such as *Blazing Combat* (Warren Publishing, October 1965 to July 1966), aimed to expose the truth of war without idealising it. Indeed, *Blazing Combat's* self-proclaimed anti-war bias led to it being banned in American PX shops after running a storyline set in Vietnam in the second issue. Similarly, Harvey Kurtzman's *Frontline Combat*, published by EC Comics between 1951 and 1954, 'worked to remove war from the context of lofty rhetoric and crusading zeal and present it in its essence... madness and destruction' (Wright 2003: 143). Despite enjoying relative popularity, these two series were by no means the norm for their time. Even with substantial changes, this genre has held strong from the 1950s, but the traditional representational strategies of the mainstream 'failed to address adequately the Cold War realities of guerrilla insurgency and nuclear brinkmanship' (Witek 2006: 37). The comics I consider here were all written from the late 1980s when adherence to the CCA regulations was on the wane, allowing for freer expression and representation of war events. However, at the same time, the representation of conflict across popular forms was beginning to be impacted by a far larger cultural lens – that of trauma. As I argue in this paper, Vietnam is a benchmark in the representation of conflict and conflict violence, due to the ways in which it has become absorbed into the American cultural imagination, and this is largely due to Vietnam's relationship to trauma studies.

The aftermath of the Vietnam War is intimately tied to the history and development of trauma studies because it was this conflict that gave the most case studies and impetus for research. Although trauma had been an area of psychological research since the late 1880s and Freud's work with Josef Breuer *The Aetiology of Hysteria* (1895), it was only with the 1980 addition of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) to the *DSM-III* that trauma officially entered both the diagnostic and research minds. This is somewhat surprising, given that the symptoms

of similar traumatic mental disorders have been represented in world literatures since the time of the ancient Greeks.

The reports of soldiers' experiences of trauma post-Vietnam are remarkably consistent with those from throughout the previous two millennia. If this phenomenon was by no means a new one when the war ended in 1975, why, then, do I claim that Vietnam is a benchmark for representations of conflict? Speaking of Vietnam as historical and social event, it is the advent of a new phase in trauma studies research; it signifies an important move forward in the classification and treatment of those who have experienced life-altering events, while also foreshadowing a more positive approach to the treatment of mental illness in general. Naming the phenomenon of conflict trauma and giving it a place within clinical and research communities gives us a new lens through which to frame representations of conflict but it also has two key limitations that need to be recognised. The first questions the efficacy of the research scope: much of the trauma theory that was developed from case studies of Vietnam veterans centred on white, working-class, male experience. As I have discussed at length elsewhere, this narrow focus negates the experiences of members of minority groups and suggests that trauma arising from conflict can be conflated with all other traumatic experiences, including both acute and chronic personal violence, political terrorism and natural disasters (Earle 2017: n.p.).³ Though my textual focus in this article is within this narrow focus, it remains a valid point in relation to wider issues in trauma studies.

The second limitation sits with classic trauma studies, which considers trauma to be unspeakable, unrepresentable, and inherently unknowable. This model does not allow for the personal nuances of trauma. Instead, contemporary, pluralistic trauma theory, 'challenges the traditional concept of trauma as unspeakable by starting from a standpoint that concedes trauma's variability in literature and society'; this model seeks to emphasise 'that trauma

occurs to actual people, in specific bodies, located within particular time periods and places' (Balaev 2014: 4,7). It is the pluralistic model to which I subscribe in this article.

Speaking of Vietnam as a chronotopic moment for artistic portrayal, it occurred at a point where art on the whole was moving into different modes of representation and the postmodern breakdown of tradition and grand narrative no longer allowed for bold, glorious war. Combining the fluidity and volatility of postmodernism with the fractures and destabilisation of trauma creates an artistic milieu that drastically changes the ways in which both creator and reader engage with works of narrative art. Naming the phenomenon of conflict trauma and using it as the key focus for representations of Vietnam is the start of the broad cultural shift that we can plot when talking about American conflict post-1975. Indeed, Vietnam sits as part of a more general cultural shift that was occurring in the West at that time. Fredric Jameson writes that Vietnam was the 'first terrible postmodernist war' (Jameson 1991: 44). He does not elaborate on this statement and, in response, Michael Bibby writes:

to modify the war as "postmodernist" implies that the war is yet another phenomenon of postmodernity. The war, in this sense, is read as exhibiting the traits of a general historical, cultural condition already identifiable. If we can attach a qualification to the name of the war, it must be because that which qualifies it supersedes it, gives it shape, definition, morphological precision. (Bibby 1999: 148)

Vietnam as an event was a product of its time and exists within the broader definitions of postmodernism and postmodernity; as such, it is incumbent on the scholar of Vietnam narratives to navigate the slippery, shifting definitions of postmodernism in their analyses. As Lucas Carpenter writes, 'some writers [...] tried to accommodate Vietnam within the realistic-naturalistic, "war is hell" model of the American war novel [...] while others realised that Vietnam demanded a very different kind of narrative paradigm' (Carpenter 2003: 31-2). The coming together of postmodernism and the shift in war experience after Vietnam only increased the slipperiness of the two categories; the similarities between traumatic

representative techniques and postmodernist techniques make the two forms difficult to distinguish. Carpenter states that Vietnam 'squashes whatever remains of the Western metanarrative of history that accommodates war as a possible inevitable form of primal human collective behaviour [...] it was a chaotic quagmire with no clear boundaries and no easily identified enemy' (Carpenter 2003: 32, 35).

In the following three sections, I look at the representation of Vietnam in three comics series from the mid-1980s to the early-2000s. I track a shift, not only in the overall attitude of the comics to the conflict, but also in the types of issue that are being shown and the ways in which trauma affects the narrative.

War within the Guidelines in *The 'Nam*

In the first issue of *The 'Nam*, Murray claims that he wrote the series with the aim 'to give a realistic portrayal of the war' (Murray in Kodosky 2011: 1049). The series ran for seven years, from 1986 to 1993, and follows a rigid structure which mimics the standard US Army tour of duty of 366 days in the theatre of war. Throughout the run, the writers place characters into actual historical events without causing disruption to the comic's timescale. This has the dual effect of both grounding the story arcs in historical landmarks that the reader is aware of to create narrative touchstones which also give credence to Murray's attempts at realism. The mimicking of the 366-day tour allows the reader to develop a relationship with the characters in a similar way to their fellow soldiers that would be lost if characters cycled in and out of the series more rapidly. Robert Kodosky notes that, 'Vietnam War comics consistently depict small cohesive platoons threatened by outside forces' (Kodosky 2011: 1057). This is the model

followed by *The 'Nam*. Though the primary focus of the first thirteen issues is Private Ed Marks, he exists within the platoon as an equal participant in all events. The positioning of Marks allows a 'handle' for the reader – a character onto whom we can latch in order to move through the narrative and place ourselves within the platoon's internal relationships. The camaraderie of the platoon adds to the realism; it is based closely on writer Doug Murray's personal experiences in Vietnam and, across the series, we see the characters forming close bonds that extend beyond their tours. For example, in *The 'Nam #15*, Marks writes a letter from Fort Jackson in South Carolina to Rob Little, who is still in Vietnam (Murray and Golden 2010: 96-118). The friendship between Marks and Little has endured beyond the geographical and chronological boundaries of their tour in Vietnam. Marks' appearances in the comic continue, though he does not return to active duty. He is shown in one further episode as a student at Columbia, engaged in a heated debate with a left-wing, anti-war Professor (Murray and Golden 2011: 120-141).

Marks represents the 'everyman soldier', conscripted and largely unprepared for what he is getting into; his naïveté is epitomised in his airsickness (Murray and Golden 2009: 7). He is an average, young, 'All-American' man. However, in many ways he is not a typical Vietnam veteran. His reaction to the anti-war Professor is remarkably mild – he snaps a pencil – and at no point does he swear nor show any further (or more extreme) signs of distress (Murray and Golden 2011: 127). I do not wish to claim that *all* Vietnam veterans suffered severe emotional distress or PTSD. That said, the *US Department of Veterans Affairs* estimate that approximately 30% of veterans have suffered from clinically-diagnosable PTSD in their lifetime (DVA 2016: n.p.). If one-third suffer serious, chronic trauma then it is likely that a notable number will suffer trauma that is less serious (but no less real to the sufferer). There is little sign of residual trauma in Ed Marks; he may be a typical soldier but he is not a typical veteran.

The 'Nam was published within the guidelines of the CCA. To a twenty-first century reader, the regulations of the CCA seem at best antiquated, at worst extremely funny. According to the Comic Books Legal Defence Fund, the original 1954 guidelines included such rules as:

- All scenes of horror, excessive bloodshed, gory or gruesome crimes, depravity, lust, sadism, masochism shall not be permitted.
- Profanity, obscenity, smut, vulgarity, or words or symbols which have acquired undesirable meanings are forbidden.
- All lurid, unsavoury, gruesome illustrations shall be eliminated. (CBLDF 2012: n.p.)

It is clear how these regulations stifled much of the 'realism' of Vietnam in *The 'Nam* – for a great deal of soldiers, swearing and grotesque violence were a daily occurrence. Specific regulations regarding the depiction of drug usage were added in 1971. The issue of drugs in Vietnam is one that has been hotly debated. A number of studies from the 1970s suggest that anywhere between ten and twenty percent of soldiers were addicted to various drugs (notably heroin) at some point during their tour – and that a significant number of them brought their addiction home with them. Put simply, 'there [was] a drug abuse problem in Vietnam' (Char 1972: 464).⁴ Despite the widespread use of drugs and an intervention by Congressmen Morgan Murphy and Robert Steele, who aimed to combat the issue of drug use among the troops, this issue does not enter the pages of *The 'Nam*. It is likely that this omission would create a relatively bland representation of the conflict, with the true nature concealed behind 'softness and censorship'.

Despite aspects of the conflict that are absent due to censorship, '*The 'Nam* helped reinvigorate the war comic genre' (Kodosky 2011: 1050). However, this was not without a little help from the mainstay characters of the mainstream. Half way through its 84-issue run, *The 'Nam* ran a single issue that both 'guest starred' the characters that made mainstream comics recognisable and hearkened back to the Manichean storylines that had been the genre's main

story trajectory. *The 'Nam #41* ('Back in the Real World') is a fanciful and almost innocent answer to the question 'What if superheroes were in Vietnam?' In an earlier issue, young private Aeder is killed and leaves behind a stack of comics. His colleague, Iceman, finds them and begins to read them nostalgically. He imagines Thor changing the weather to expose a VC ambush, Captain America destroying a bomb planted at the US Embassy and Iron Man diverting missiles aimed at American planes. The three then capture Ho Chi Minh and fly him to Paris to negotiate a settlement. Iceman and a fellow soldier, Martini, laugh over these comics, making it clear they know that such scenarios are pure fiction. The ending of the comic undercuts this mood of realism by returning to the glorious heroism that characterises the mainstream. As two soldiers watch Iceman's helicopter leave, the faces of Iron Man, Cap and Thor appear in the clouds. One soldier comments, 'Iceman doesn't think there are heroes anymore!' and receives the reply, 'Real heroes rarely think of themselves as anything special' (Murray et al 1990: 27). In positioning Iceman in the same arena of characters as superheroes, he is afforded a distinctly American (and distinctly mainstream) heroism that undercuts any attempt at realistic presentation and replaces it with saccharine Manicheanism.

Despite its popularity, and success in rekindling the war comics genre, by 1990 *The 'Nam's* sales were falling. As crossover issues were becoming a common marketing technique, writers introduced a two-part arc called 'The Punisher invades *The 'Nam*', a formula that was repeated with a three-part arc in 1992. Frank Castle (alias The Punisher) is a classic anti-hero; a Marine and martial arts expert of exceptional physical and mental agility, he becomes a vigilante after the mob-ordered murder of his family (Dougall 2009). As I have written elsewhere, 'The addition of the Punisher skews the series' attempt at a realistic chronology' (Earle 2017: n.p.). Though this may be problematic when considering the 'realism' of *The 'Nam*, Castle's addition to the series adds a further dimension to the series through the lens of trauma. Throughout his entire development, Castle has remained a deeply traumatised

character. The death of his family in Central Park is the key motivator for his actions but the origin stories in *The 'Nam* and *The Punisher: Born* (which I discuss in due course) suggest a traumatisation that begins in Vietnam and intensifies in New York. His depiction in *The 'Nam* is much more in line with the image of the superhero than the Vietnam soldier. The central break in the conventions set up in previous issues of *The 'Nam* is that Castle is positioned against the other characters and not as their comrade. This goes against the precedent described by Kodosky. In the first arc, which I will call *TP1* for ease of description, Castle is deployed on a 'Black Ops' style mission to kill 'The Monkey', a VC sniper who is killing large numbers of American troops. In diametric opposition to the typical operating practice of such missions, Castle acts as a vigilante and allows his personal vendetta with The Monkey to become the primary motive; the writers take his 'home' motivations and move them wholesale to the guerrilla practices in the jungles of Vietnam. In similar fashion to the rest of *The 'Nam*, the narrative is linear and uses no framing devices to play with levels of narration.

The second Punisher/*The 'Nam* crossover, henceforth *TP2*, a three-part arc from 1992, works in a markedly different way. The narrative of Frank Castle is framed within the comic. A young soldier is seriously wounded in a firefight and, in order to keep him awake and mentally occupied, his commanding officer tells him the story of Castle and his first tour in Vietnam. The narrative follows the soldier's trip to hospital, treatment and ends with him resting; the story of Castle spans three issues, each one framed with the young soldier's medical movement from warzone to field hospital. Again, Castle is positioned against the rest of his platoon. He discovers a scam to gain huge amounts of money from scared young soldiers, who pay to be allowed to go home and are then shot. Castle attempts to alert senior officers to this but they are involved and he fails. The three issues follow Castle's realisation of the level of corruption among the senior American soldiers and his move from new recruit – 'FNG' in Vietnam slang – to hardened and battle-numbed. It mirrors the artistic style and carefully sanitised depiction of

war given in *The 'Nam*, but, in line with other *Punisher* comics, sits at the upper threshold of acceptable within the CCA guidelines and lays the groundwork for later reboots of the character, in which all adherence to censorial strictures will be ignored completely. Furthermore, it does not lose sight of the traumatic nature of conflict that we see to an extent in *The 'Nam*, again laying out a basis for Castle's story to begin in Vietnam and not New York. The depiction is certainly not one of nuanced and complex trauma in conflict but it is not gung-ho glorification either.

The Punisher: Born and the Underbelly of Vietnam

The Punisher's origin story is one of raw trauma and simple revenge. After returning from Vietnam and joining the Police Force in New York City, he and his family witness a mob murder during a picnic in a park; it is a case of 'wrong place and wrong time'. Frank Castle witnesses his family being machine-gunned to death. This experience transforms him into The Punisher, a one-man vigilante army, declaring war on criminals around the world. As with most superheroes, this origin story has been tweaked and updated regularly throughout the run; The Punisher has previously been configured as a veteran of Operation Desert Storm. However, it is in *The Punisher: Born* that the lens of trauma is most vigorously applied, arguing that he 'was in fact born on a battlefield overseas and not thanks to a domestic tragedy that occurred stateside after his military service ended' (DiPaolo 2011: 116).

Set over four issues, *Born* is narrated by young, naïve Stevie Goodwin, a conscripted soldier who is woefully out of place in Vietnam and waiting for 'the day I will step about the big freedom bird and leave this place forever' (Ennis and Robertson 2007: n.p.). He is stationed at Fire Base Valley Forge, the last remaining outpost on the border with Cambodia. The base is

very badly run, the commanding officer has no concern for continuing to keep the base working, and activity has largely ceased. It is only because Frank Castle, here a captain of some note, maintains a small platoon to keep up the reconnaissance patrols that there is any military activity at all in the area. Despite Castle's constant complaint to the General that the base is vulnerable to attack and that Viet Cong forces are at work in the area nothing is done. Castle has 'fallen in love with conflict' – he lives for the violence and the rules of war by which he lives (Ennis and Robertson 2007: n.p.). His mental health deteriorates and he experiences a voice, represented by a black text box, who speaks to him and offers protection and a never-ending conflict to give his life meaning.

It is never made clear whether this voice is representative of a psychotic break, a supernatural force or some other kind of external entity. As his sense of reality becomes increasingly warped and the base is threatened with closure, Castle tricks the general into exposing himself to a sniper before the base is attacked by large numbers of Viet Cong soldiers. Outnumbered and facing certain death, the voice utters:

Castle loves war.
Vietnam may be ending, but Castle can have another war—an endless one.
But there will be an unnamed price.
All he has to do is say 'Yes'. (Ennis and Robertson 2007: n.p.)

Castle shrieks 'YES!' and is able to single-handedly annihilate the remaining VC soldiers; Stevie Goodwin and many of his comrades are killed. A white skull appears in the sky. Lorrie Palmer suggests that the white skull cloud in the sky during Castle's transformation represents both the 'external voice of Death itself and [...] his own internal darkness'; she likens the skull to the bat signal in the *Batman* franchise, a sign of the character's identity made external (Ennis and Robertson 2007: 204). I contend that, for Castle, the skull is more than just a visual clue to his identity; it is a marker of his transformation. Not only does it signal who he is but that this identity has developed throughout the fire fight, the smoke of which creates the skull.

In stark contrast with the sanitised representation in *The 'Nam*, *The Punisher: Born* comprises drug usage, extreme violence, rape and profanity; the text is unbelievably brutal, vicious and unyielding. One key aspect of the narrative is Goodwin's protection of Angel, an African-American soldier who is addicted to heroin but still able to carry out his duties. Angel saved Goodwin from a VC ambush and Goodwin sees it as his duty to protect his friend to ensure his safe return. The two men are diametrically opposed, not only in their physical presentation (baby-faced, blond-haired Goodwin *versus* weary Angel) but in their attitudes. Angel says,

I keep hearin' you talk about this idea you got—this real America? It's a fuckin' dream, man. It belongs in... the Wild muthafuckin' West. That's the real America, right there: back when you was shootin' each other, rapin' red Indians an' callin' me nigga... An' don't be given me none o' that shit 'bout how there's good along wit' the bad. How all everybody gotta do is work hard an' they gonna make it. There's good for you and there's bad for me, Stevie. Ain't no more to it than that. All I got waitin' for me's a ghetto fulla death. (Ennis and Robertson 2007: n.p.)

Angel not only demonstrates his character and his pre-Vietnam existence, he also makes a bold statement on the nature of America and what it is to be a black American. Angel sees the divide as clear cut: white men get the good stuff; black men get the 'ghetto fulla death'. He indicts the USA for creating a racially charged atmosphere that simultaneously created the almost farcical military situation in Vietnam and the similarly horrific existence of African-Americans in the ghetto. Ennis and Robertson do not wish to labour the point that racial instabilities and inequalities fuelled much of the action in Vietnam but this speech from Angel highlights both Goodwin's naïveté and another dimension of the reality of 1960s America.⁵

Angel represents a further aspect of both Vietnam and traumatic experience – self-medication. *Born* takes up the issue of the widespread drug use in Vietnam that *The 'Nam* works to systematically ignore. As I mentioned previously, this was no small problem. A large number of soldiers (especially those from lower socio-economic backgrounds and those for

whom the training had been particularly harrowing) self-medicated with copious quantities of alcohol and illegal drugs. As a coping mechanism, this is by no means unusual, especially given the easy availability of cheap, potent substances in Vietnam. Angel has moved his home-side struggles and experiences directly into the jungle. For him, Vietnam is no different to his home. Just as Frank Castle is desperate to remain because he is in love with war, Angel is desperate not to return because he has nothing to return to. He understands that the trauma of conflict will only continue on return and that Goodwin's dreams of marrying a pretty girl and having a brood of sons is not realistic. Goodwin does not realise, as Angel does, that the silence that sits at the centre of his experiences is both a refusal and an inability to speak – and that this block is precisely what will make his return home difficult.

In the centre of the text sits a rape scene that poses a number of questions, not only pertaining to the nature of sexual violence in Vietnam but also regarding the ways in which traumatic experiences affect individual responses to extreme events. The patrol captures a female Viet Cong sniper and one of the group, McDonald, begins to rape her. Castle shoots the VC woman in the head and states, 'No rape. We're here to kill the enemy. That's all' (Ennis and Robertson 2007: n.p.). McDonald is washing his face in a nearby lake when Castle places his boot on his head and drowns him. Goodwin observes all this from behind a tree and flees in terror. Later, Castle approaches Goodwin and explains that his actions were kindness – to save her life would only prolong her suffering. Goodwin narrates his fear of Castle 'because of the look he has in his eyes [...] and because what he did to that girl today was his idea of helping her out' (Ennis and Robertson 2007: n.p.). According to Kodosky, 'Castle demonstrates a twisted sense of mercy and morality in the field, prefiguring the odd moral code he adopts as the Punisher' (2007: 117).

The actions of Castle during and following this episode suggest he is deeply traumatised. His moral code has become extremely warped and his shooting of the woman pushes the idea

of 'cruel to be kind' beyond breaking point. His personal moral compass is aligned to arbitrary rules of warfare and not the rules of common decency that operate in the 'real world'; such rules will continue to govern his actions on return to the US and throughout his 'career' as the Punisher. In her seminal 1975 text, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*, Susan Brownmiller writes:

War provides men with the perfect psychological backdrop to give vent to their contempt for women. The maleness of the military – the brute power of weaponry exclusive to their hands, the spiritual bonding of men at arms, the manly discipline of orders given and orders obeyed, the simple logic of the hierarchical command – confirms for men what they long suspect – that women are peripheral to the world that counts (Brownmiller 1975: 165).

For Brownmiller, war gives an opportunity for that which is innate in man's psyche to become reality. She suggests that the military is an intrinsically male institution, designed to accommodate and play into essentialist ideas of masculinity. It is also a situation wherein perpetrators of rape are likely to remain unpunished. Although rape as a weapon is widely denounced as a crime against humanity – and the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1820 in 2008, which states that 'rape and other forms of sexual violence can constitute war crimes, crimes against humanity or a constitutive act with respect to genocide' (2009: online) – it is incredibly difficult to punish given the scale of the act and the complexity of prosecution for these types of crimes. Brownmiller writes, 'Men who rape are ordinary Joes, made unordinary by entry into the most exclusive male-only club in the world' (Brownmiller 1975: 25). War rape gives average men a way to be 'something'.

The rape is an attempt for McDonald (and, by extension, the rest of the patrol) to regain control of the landscape and reassert their power as men. Unable to seize this power in a military arena, rape is a logical choice of action for this reassertion of power. It returns us to Brownmiller's suggestion that rape makes ordinary men feel exceptional. It also brings this discussion back to the concept of trauma. If Castle's traumatisation has skewed his moral code,

then so has McDonald's. His experiences in Vietnam have similarly affected his morality and his reaction to 'the enemy'. McDonald acts out of fear, a need to take control of the situation, to reassert his dominance in the military arena and a deeply traumatised and traumatising inability to position himself within his surrounding in a mentally and morally healthy way. I do not wish to suggest that rape is *not* a horrific act to perpetrate in any circumstances. What I am suggesting is that the rape event represents the level to which the trauma of conflict is affecting the soldiers and that this can be traced, not only in McDonald's action, but the rest of the platoon's inaction and Castle's violent reaction. Though other mainstream depictions of war rape do give panel space to the victim, the VC woman in this episode is barely seen. In purposely *not* positioning her within the image, Ennis allows the focus of the event to remain on the traumatisation of the men, leaving the complex issue of her trauma unspoken and unrepresented.

In Castle, Angel and McDonald, some kind of traumatic action becomes their way to survive. Angel self-medicates to mediate his experiences through a pharmaceutical lens and give himself emotional pain relief through a literal pain-killing substance. McDonald attempts to overcome his impotence and reassert his masculinity through an act of sexual violence. Castle has given himself over to conflict; he positions himself within the regulations and strictures of conflict while also manipulating those regulations to attempt to prolong his engagement with it. Such is the nature and level of his traumatisation that he finds himself both unwilling and potentially unable to return to civilian life. It does not matter whether the voice that guides Castle is a supernatural entity or his own psychoses – what matters is that he listens to it, a clear depiction of trauma in itself. Each of these characters represents a different angle of the conflict and its traumatic reach. That they do so in ways that are visceral and boldly against the

guidelines of the CCA, in stark opposition to the depictions in *The 'Nam*, shows how much the form (and the mainstream genre in particular) has developed since the 1950s.

I close with a question of efficacy: is *The Punisher: Born* a more effective narrative of VN than *The 'Nam* or any other 'softer' narrative? I would not wish to suggest that the addition of profanity, extreme violence and drug use necessarily makes a narrative more effective. What it does do is opens a number of aspects of the war to representation; it allows comics creators to present the war that most grunts would have experienced and to create traumatic affect. It pushes representations of this conflict away from previous war comics and their censored story arcs. In a 1990 interview on *Vietnam Journal*, Don Lomax explained his reasons for writing the series:

You know, all the time I was there I was thinking, "This would make a good comic book'. When I came back I fully expected to see lots of comic books start up on Vietnam, and for some reason they never did. We got the same old reground, reworked World War II stories that continued for years (Lomax 1990: 94).

The Second World War fits the traditional comics narrative of conflict – the clear code of conduct and easily-defined enemy being fought in a geographically unambiguous theatre – in ways that Vietnam does not. *Vietnam Journal* follows protagonist Scott 'Journal' Neithammer, a war correspondent and former infantryman who served in Korea. He arrives in Vietnam, expecting to write features 'like all the rest, interviews with generals, tactical strategies, cooperative campaigns against communist insurgents, and body counts', quickly realising 'that the real story was not at battalion headquarters' (Lomax 2003: 4, 6). Instead, Neithammer finds 'it was in the bush with the slime, the stink, the constant fear and frustration of fighting a war that "the powers that be" would not let us win' (Lomax 2003: 8). The old narratives no longer fit and *Journal*, like Lomax and other writers of conflict, must reconcile this.

In an article for *Military Review*, Major General Peter W. Chiarelli and Major Patrick R. Michaelis of the US Army write:

For the last three decades, traditional training models prepared the army to win our Nation's wars on the plains of Europe, or the deserts of the Middle East. [The experience in Iraq taught], however, that it was no longer adequate as a military force to accept classic military modes of thought. America's military needs to reconsider the very nature of what it means to fight (Chiarelli and Michaelis 2005:4).

For war comics, and indeed conflict in all media, life and art are in constant dialogue. The nature of war has changed drastically over the past 40 years as shifts in both technologies and ideologies have altered the theatres and social framing of conflict. As such, it is incumbent on creators of conflict art in general (and comics in particular) to 'set their stories within the context of America's larger historical experience, both real and imagined' (Kodosky 2011: 1055). As conflict art turns more to considering the impact of the traumatic aftermath than narratives of glorification and protection, the entire conversation turns towards the traumatic lens. This article has traced a similar shift in textual and thematic focus across mainstream comics franchises, showing how comics have plotted the development of representations of conflict through the lens of trauma and, furthermore, how the form's relationship with censorship has affected these representations.

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¹ 'Mainstream' is a term used to classify comics from the two biggest US publishers, Marvel and DC, but also encompasses smaller presses, including Dark Horse and Image. Mainstream comics are predominantly superhero narratives, though other genres are included too; like much comics terminology, this is a slippery term.

² For the benefits of clarity within this essay, I will refer to the Northern troops as the NVA and the Southern troops as the ARVN. These terms are generally accepted by historians, despite the use of variants by some parties.

³ By 'acute', I refer to single events of rape or harassment, whereas I would characterise long-standing domestic abuse or bullying as 'chronic'.

⁴ See Stanton (1976); Robins et al. (2010); and Char (1972).

⁵ 'Selective Service regulations offered deferments for college attendance and a variety of essential civilian occupations that favoured middle- and upper- class whites. The vast majority of draftees were poor, undereducated, and urban, blue-collar workers or unemployed. This reality struck hard in the African American community. Furthermore, African Americans were woefully underrepresented on local draft boards; in 1966 blacks accounted for slightly more than 1 percent of all draft board members, and seven state boards had no black representation at all. In terms of combat deaths, although they made up less than 10 percent of American men in arms and about 13 percent of the U.S. population between 1961 and 1966, they accounted for almost 20 percent of all combat-related deaths in Vietnam during that period. In 1965 alone African Americans represented almost one-fourth of the Army's killed in action'. This information comes directly from *the Encyclopaedia of the Vietnam War: A Political, Social, and Military History*. Ed. Spencer C. Tucker.