



GOING ACROSS THE POND: TRAUMA, TESTIMONY, AND THE SILENCED GAZE OF THE VIETNAM GRUNT IN MICHAEL MCCORMICK'S ACROSS THE POND

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Cite This Article: I. Mohammed Nazar, I. Vazeer Mohamed, S. Sheik Dawood & M. Mohamed Khaled, "Going Across the Pond: Trauma, Testimony, and the Silenced Gaze of the Vietnam Grunt in Michael McCormick's Across the Pond", International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Modern Education, Volume 12, Issue 1, January - June, Page Number 92-96, 2026.

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Type of Review: Peer Reviewed as per |C|O|P|E| Guidance.

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20935445>

Abstract:

Across the Pond (1990) by Michael McCormick is a scalding novella based on the author's experience as a decorated Marine infantryman serving in the Vietnam War. The story addresses the mental shattering of its main character, Sean Macbrie, the main character, or more accurately referred to as the enlisted combatant or more accurately referred to as the grunt, as his voice has always been relegated both historically and through literature to the war. This paper contends that McCormick uses narrative fragmentation, body memory, and strategic silence not as aesthetic constraints but as vital modes of testifying to what language must not portray. Key messages are post-combat trauma, moral injury, breakdown of coherent self-narrative, and how the viewpoint of the grunt has been systematically erased from national memory. It is based on the theory of Cathy Caruth of trauma as something unassimilated and belated, in the conceptualization of testimony as a moral witnessing act by Shoshana Felman, and the sociohistorical framing of the grunt as an iconic and disposable one by Kyle Longley. The novella avoids redemptive or heroic tropes of war by foreshadowing Mac's inner lostness, his inability to establish communication with civilians, his flashbacks of the past, and by making silence a kind of resistance. Finally, this paper rebrands Across the Pond as an intervention in the literature of the Vietnam War an intervention that, nonetheless, brings back some dignity to the silenced gaze of the common soldier and a place of ethical witnessing, rather than a place of pathology. By doing so, it provokes the reader to hear the outside of speech, into the disjunctions in which truth lies.

Key Words: Vietnam War Literature, Trauma Narrative, Testimony, Moral Injury, Grunt, Narrative Silence, PTSD, Michael McCormick, Across the Pond, Ethical Witness.

Introduction:

The Vietnam War generated a body of literature that challenges conventional narratives of heroism by foregrounding the psychological devastation, ethical dilemmas, and enduring trauma experienced by ordinary soldiers. Among those most frequently marginalized in historical and literary discourse is the infantryman, commonly known as the "grunt," whose lived experiences have often been overshadowed by political narratives and military strategy. As Kyle Longley observes, grunts formed the backbone of the American war effort in Vietnam, yet their voices remained largely absent from official histories and collective memory (Longley 24). This historical marginalization provides the foundation for Michael McCormick's Across the Pond (1990), a novella that seeks to recover the silenced perspective of the common combat soldier.

McCormick occupies a distinctive position within Vietnam War literature because his work is informed by both personal combat experience and professional psychological expertise. Having served as a decorated Marine infantryman and later practiced as a clinical psychologist, he combines firsthand knowledge of warfare with a nuanced understanding of trauma and psychological recovery. Rather than celebrating military heroism, Across the Pond presents war as an experience of moral fragmentation, emotional isolation, and fractured memory. Although the novella shares thematic concerns with works such as Ron Kovic's Born on the Fourth of July, Tim O'Brien's The Things They Carried, and Karl Marlantes's Matterhorn, its concise narrative and intense psychological focus distinguish it from these more widely studied texts.

The novella centres on Sean "Mac" McBride, whose post-war existence is shaped by intrusive memories, recurring nightmares, and an inability to reconcile his wartime experiences with civilian life. McCormick portrays trauma not as a completed event confined to the battlefield but as an ongoing psychological condition that repeatedly intrudes into the present. This representation closely reflects Cathy Caruth's understanding of trauma as an experience that is not fully comprehended when it occurs but returns belatedly through fragmented recollection and repetition (Caruth 4). Mac's recurring memories, emotional withdrawal, and disrupted sense of self demonstrate how traumatic experience resists coherent narration and continually shapes personal identity.

Equally significant is McCormick's exploration of testimony and silence. Rather than providing explicit accounts of violence, the novella frequently relies on fragmented dialogue, sensory recollections, and deliberate omissions to communicate experiences that exceed the limits of language. This narrative strategy corresponds with Shoshana Felman's conception of testimony as an incomplete and ethically charged act of witnessing, in which silence itself becomes a meaningful expression of

traumatic truth (Felman 5). McCormick's restrained style therefore transforms absence into testimony, compelling readers to engage with what remains unspoken rather than merely what is narrated.

Through its fragmented narrative structure, vivid sensory imagery, and sustained focus on the psychological and moral consequences of combat, *Across the Pond* reclaims the neglected perspective of the Vietnam infantryman. Instead of depicting the grunt as either a heroic warrior or a passive victim, McCormick presents him as a morally conscious individual struggling to preserve humanity amid violence and social neglect. Drawing upon trauma theory, testimony studies, and Vietnam War historiography, this paper argues that *Across the Pond* functions as an important intervention in Vietnam War literature by restoring ethical agency and historical visibility to the silenced voice of the ordinary soldier.

Literature Review:

Vietnam War literature has attracted sustained scholarly attention for its departure from conventional war narratives that celebrate patriotism and military heroism. Instead, critics have emphasized the psychological, ethical, and existential consequences of combat, portraying war as an experience of trauma, moral ambiguity, and fractured identity. This shift has encouraged interdisciplinary approaches that combine literary criticism with trauma theory, memory studies, and testimony studies to examine how war narratives challenge dominant historical and political discourses.

A substantial body of scholarship has examined the representation of trauma in Vietnam War fiction through the theoretical framework developed by Cathy Caruth. Caruth argues that trauma is not fully comprehended at the moment of its occurrence but returns belatedly through recurring memories, fragmented narratives, and compulsive repetition (Caruth 4). Building upon this perspective, Mark Heberle demonstrates that Vietnam War fiction often performs trauma through disrupted chronology, unstable narration, and repetitive narrative structures rather than through straightforward storytelling (Heberle 73). Such formal experimentation reflects the inability of traumatic experience to conform to coherent narrative conventions and has become a defining characteristic of post-Vietnam literature.

Another significant area of scholarship concerns testimony and the limits of language in representing violence. Shoshana Felman argues that testimony emerges not from complete narration but from gaps, silences, and the failure of language itself, making traumatic memory inherently incomplete (Felman 17). Similarly, Alison Booth interprets silence in post-war narratives as an ethical mode of witnessing rather than an absence of meaning, suggesting that omitted experiences often communicate the deepest psychological wounds (Booth 112-14). These theoretical perspectives have influenced literary analyses that view narrative fragmentation, understatement, and silence as deliberate artistic strategies for representing the unspeakable realities of war.

Scholars have also focused on the historical marginalization of the ordinary infantryman, commonly referred to as the "grunt." Kyle Longley argues that although grunts constituted the majority of American combat soldiers in Vietnam, their experiences were largely excluded from official military histories and public remembrance (Longley 24). Likewise, Philip Beidler describes the grunt's perspective as a form of "counter-memory" that challenges sanitized national narratives by foregrounding bodily suffering, moral uncertainty, and psychological disillusionment (Beidler 89). These studies have significantly contributed to recovering the voices of ordinary soldiers within Vietnam War historiography and literary criticism.

Despite the extensive scholarship devoted to major Vietnam War writers such as Tim O'Brien, Ron Kovic, and Karl Marlantes, comparatively little academic attention has been given to Michael McCormick's *Across the Pond*. Existing discussions largely acknowledge the novella's authenticity because of McCormick's dual identity as a decorated Marine veteran and clinical psychotherapist (McCormick 52), while Ron Kovic's foreword recognizes the work as an important contribution to Vietnam War literature (Kovic 6). Nevertheless, comprehensive scholarly analyses of the novella remain limited, particularly those that integrate trauma theory, testimony studies, and the historiography of the American grunt.

The present study addresses this gap by examining *Across the Pond* through the interconnected perspectives of trauma, testimony, and moral injury. It argues that McCormick employs fragmented narration, embodied memory, and strategic silence not merely as literary techniques but as ethical forms of witnessing that restore historical visibility and moral agency to the marginalized Vietnam infantryman. In doing so, this study extends existing scholarship by positioning *Across the Pond* as a significant yet underexplored contribution to Vietnam War literature.

Trauma and Embodied Memory in *Across the Pond*:

Michael McCormick's *Across the Pond* presents trauma as an embodied condition that extends beyond psychological suffering to become inscribed upon the body, memory, and identity of its protagonist, Sean "Mac" McBride. Rather than depicting trauma as a single catastrophic event, the novella represents it as an ongoing process that repeatedly disrupts the survivor's present through intrusive memories, nightmares, emotional detachment, and sensory recollections. McCormick's portrayal closely aligns with Bessel van der Kolk's proposition that traumatic experiences become embedded within the body, where memory is retained through physiological and sensory responses rather than conscious recollection (van der Kolk 97). Consequently, Mac's recurring nightmares, heightened vigilance, and emotional withdrawal are not merely psychological symptoms but manifestations of trauma's persistent presence within the body.

The novella repeatedly returns to moments of extreme violence that function as traumatic anchors within Mac's memory. The horrifying death of Utah, whose mutilated body continually resurfaces in Mac's nightmares, demonstrates Cathy Caruth's argument that trauma is not fully experienced when the original event occurs but returns belatedly through involuntary repetition (Caruth 4; McCormick 9). Likewise, the violent death of Bleachman and the repeated encounters with battlefield destruction become recurring psychic wounds that resist closure. These experiences are presented not as isolated memories but as fragments that continually intrude upon Mac's present, illustrating the cyclical nature of traumatic recollection. McCormick further suggests that physical injury and psychological trauma are inseparable, linking civilian experiences of bodily pain with later combat experiences to reveal trauma as an accumulative rather than isolated phenomenon.

Another significant dimension of McCormick's representation of trauma is dissociation. Mac frequently displays emotional numbness, exhaustion, and psychological detachment in situations of extreme violence, reflecting the defensive mechanisms commonly associated with post-traumatic stress disorder. His description through the iconic image of the "thousand-yard stare" symbolizes the emotional withdrawal characteristic of combat trauma. Judith Herman identifies such emotional

detachment as a central feature of chronic PTSD, whereby survivors distance themselves psychologically from overwhelming experiences in order to endure them (Herman 43). McCormick therefore portrays apparent emotional indifference not as a lack of feeling but as a necessary strategy of psychological survival.

The novella also disrupts conventional narrative chronology to mirror the temporal dislocation produced by trauma. Memories emerge unexpectedly, collapsing distinctions between past and present, so that wartime experiences continually intrude upon Mac's post-war existence. Cathy Caruth argues that traumatic memory resists linear narration because it remains incompletely processed and repeatedly returns to consciousness in fragmented forms (Caruth 62). McCormick reproduces this temporal instability through abrupt shifts between combat experiences and civilian life, illustrating how trauma abolishes chronological boundaries and transforms the past into an ever-present reality.

Equally important is McCormick's emphasis on sensory memory. Rather than recounting events through detached narration, Mac repeatedly relives the physical sensations of combat: the smell of phosphorus, the sounds of explosions, the sight of mutilated bodies, and the tactile experience of battlefield violence (McCormick 8-9). Such sensory immediacy reflects Ruth Leys' observation that traumatic memory frequently bypasses rational cognition and remains lodged within bodily experience (Leys 186). Accordingly, McCormick privileges fragmented sensory impressions over coherent explanation, suggesting that the physical experience of trauma exceeds the capacity of conventional language.

The narrative structure itself reinforces this understanding of trauma. Fragmented chronology, abrupt transitions, and elliptical narration reproduce the disorientation experienced by both the protagonist and the reader. As Mark Heberle observes, Vietnam War fiction frequently allows narrative form itself to express trauma, permitting fragmentation to communicate what direct language cannot adequately convey (Heberle 78). McCormick adopts this formal strategy to transform the reader into an active witness who experiences the instability and psychological rupture characteristic of traumatic memory. Through its integration of embodied suffering, sensory recollection, and fragmented narration, *Across the Pond* demonstrates that trauma is not simply represented within the text but enacted through its narrative form, making the reader participate in the fractured consciousness of the Vietnam veteran.

Testimony and the Failure of Language:

In *Across the Pond*, testimony is constructed not through detailed narration but through silence, fragmentation, and linguistic restraint. McCormick suggests that the experience of war exceeds the limits of ordinary language, making traumatic memory resistant to coherent expression. Mac's understated response to questions about Vietnam "It wasn't that bad" (McCormick 47) illustrates this paradox. Rather than functioning as denial, the statement reveals the inadequacy of language to communicate overwhelming suffering. This narrative strategy reflects Shoshana Felman's concept of the "crisis of witnessing," in which trauma cannot be conveyed through complete or transparent narration because the experience itself remains psychologically inaccessible (Felman 5). Likewise, Cathy Caruth argues that traumatic memory resists rational representation since it emerges as the recurring return of an event that was never fully assimilated when it occurred (Caruth 62). Consequently, Mac's silence becomes a more authentic form of testimony than elaborate verbal explanation.

The novella further demonstrates that the failure of testimony is reinforced by institutional responses that privilege patriotic narratives over individual suffering. Military recognition acknowledges Mac's acts of courage while simultaneously obscuring the profound psychological consequences of combat (McCormick 19-20). Likewise, the rejection he later encounters when seeking psychological assistance reveals society's inability to recognize the emotional realities of returning veterans. Judith Herman describes such experiences as forms of "social invalidation," whereby survivors are denied recognition, empathy, and opportunities for recovery, thereby intensifying their traumatic isolation (Herman 118). McCormick therefore exposes the institutional mechanisms that transform the veteran from a national hero into a socially marginalized figure, illustrating how silence is imposed not only by trauma but also by cultural and political indifference.

McCormick reinforces this crisis of testimony through his narrative technique. His prose is deliberately fragmented, abrupt, and elliptical, reproducing the fractured consciousness of a traumatized survivor rather than presenting events in a linear sequence. Short, incomplete sentences and sudden shifts in perspective mirror the psychological disorientation that accompanies traumatic memory (McCormick 9). Bessel van der Kolk argues that trauma disrupts the brain's capacity to organize experience into coherent narrative, leaving survivors with sensory fragments instead of chronological recollections (van der Kolk 102). McCormick translates this neurological reality into literary form, allowing the structure of the novella itself to communicate the disintegration of memory.

Sensory imagery plays an equally significant role in expressing what language cannot adequately represent. Rather than relying on descriptive explanation, the narrative repeatedly evokes the smell of burning phosphorus, the sound of incoming mortar fire, and the tactile immediacy of mud, blood, and bodily injury (McCormick 8-9). These recurring sensory impressions illustrate Ruth Leys' argument that traumatic experience is initially registered through the body before it becomes available to conscious interpretation (Leys 186). The body therefore functions as an archive of memory, preserving experiences that language alone cannot fully recover.

Silence ultimately emerges as the novella's most powerful mode of ethical witnessing. McCormick frequently withholds explicit descriptions of violence, allowing omission itself to communicate the magnitude of psychological suffering. This narrative restraint corresponds with Dori Laub's observation that traumatic testimony is often characterized by absences and interruptions because the witness confronts experiences that exceed representation (Laub 69). Similarly, Alison Booth argues that silence in war literature should be understood not as narrative deficiency but as an ethical acknowledgement of irreparable loss and collective responsibility (Booth 114). Mac's reluctance to recount specific wartime experiences therefore reflects neither emotional weakness nor deliberate concealment but a recognition that certain realities cannot be adequately translated into language without diminishing their moral complexity.

By combining fragmented narration, sensory immediacy, and strategic silence, *Across the Pond* redefines testimony as an ethical process of witnessing rather than a complete record of historical events. The novella resists conventional expectations of narrative coherence and instead invites readers to experience the uncertainty, fragmentation, and emotional dislocation that

characterize traumatic memory. As Ron Kovic observes in his foreword, McCormick's work restores a voice to ordinary soldiers whose experiences have remained largely unheard (Kovic 6). Consequently, *Across the Pond* demonstrates that the most truthful testimony is not necessarily the most detailed account but the one that most faithfully preserves the fractures, silences, and unresolved memories through which trauma continues to be lived.

The Silenced Gaze of the Grunt: Moral Injury and Social Erasure

Across the Pond extends beyond the psychological framework of post-traumatic stress disorder by foregrounding the concept of moral injury, a form of trauma that arises when individuals participate in, witness, or fail to prevent actions that violate deeply held ethical beliefs. As Brett T. Litz et al. define it, moral injury results from "perpetrating, failing to prevent, or bearing witness to acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations" (Litz et al. 699). McCormick presents moral injury as a lasting psychological and ethical wound, demonstrating that the burden of war is shaped not only by fear and violence but also by profound conflicts between personal conscience and military obligation.

Mac's moral consciousness distinguishes him from the culture of violence surrounding him. His reaction to the execution of an unarmed Vietnamese civilian reveals an acute awareness of the ethical boundaries that war repeatedly transgresses (McCormick 11-12). Although powerless to prevent the atrocity, his refusal to accept such violence exposes the internal conflict between obedience and conscience that defines his wartime experience. Jonathan Shay argues that moral injury emerges when soldiers experience betrayal by legitimate authority in situations involving high moral stakes (Shay 24). McCormick illustrates precisely this form of betrayal, showing how institutional authority normalizes violence while simultaneously eroding the moral integrity of those compelled to witness it.

The novella consistently portrays Mac as preserving his humanity despite the dehumanizing logic of war. His willingness to risk his own life in order to rescue a wounded comrade and his refusal to embrace indiscriminate violence reveal a moral identity that survives even under extreme conditions (McCormick 8-12). Rather than celebrating aggression or military heroism, McCormick emphasizes compassion, responsibility, and ethical reflection as the defining qualities of the ordinary infantryman. This portrayal challenges stereotypical representations of soldiers as either heroic warriors or desensitized killers, presenting the grunt instead as an individual struggling to reconcile military duty with fundamental human values. As Philip Beidler argues, the enlisted soldier's war was shaped less by political ideology than by immediate questions of survival, conscience, and human responsibility (Beidler 89).

McCormick further demonstrates that moral injury does not end with the cessation of combat but continues through the veteran's experience of social exclusion and institutional neglect. Upon returning home, Mac discovers that the skills, sacrifices, and leadership acquired during military service possess little value within civilian society (McCormick 50-51). His unsuccessful search for employment, the suspicion he encounters within academic settings, and the refusal of psychological support illustrate the broader failure of post-war society to acknowledge the complex realities of veterans' experiences. Jerry Lembcke argues that many Vietnam veterans became symbolic targets for public resentment directed toward an unpopular war rather than recipients of social recognition and support (Lembcke 73). McCormick's portrayal of social rejection reflects this historical reality, revealing how institutional indifference compounds the psychological wounds already inflicted by combat.

The novella also employs the recurring image of the "thousand-yard stare" to symbolize the enduring consequences of abandonment and moral exhaustion. This visual motif extends beyond individual trauma to represent the collective condition of Vietnam veterans who returned from war carrying unresolved psychological burdens while confronting public misunderstanding and neglect (McCormick 51). Through such imagery, McCormick demonstrates that moral injury persists because society fails to provide meaningful recognition of veterans' suffering or opportunities for ethical reconciliation.

Importantly, *Across the Pond* refuses to reduce Mac to the status of a passive victim. Instead, his persistent moral reflection becomes the foundation of his dignity and ethical authority. His assertion that war itself constitutes a moral crime reflects not political rhetoric but the testimony of an individual whose convictions have been forged through direct experience (McCormick 48). In this respect, McCormick transforms the figure of the grunt from an anonymous participant in military history into a moral witness whose perspective challenges official narratives of heroism and national identity. This interpretation corresponds with Kyle Longley's historical reassessment of the American infantryman as a thoughtful and morally conscious individual rather than merely an expendable instrument of war (Longley 24).

Through its exploration of moral injury, institutional betrayal, and social marginalization, *Across the Pond* redefines the Vietnam grunt as an ethical witness whose greatest struggle lies not only in surviving combat but also in preserving humanity within systems that repeatedly deny it. McCormick ultimately argues that the most enduring wounds of war are moral rather than physical, and that recognizing these invisible injuries is essential to restoring dignity to those whose voices have long remained unheard.

Conclusion:

Across the Pond occupies a distinctive place within Vietnam War literature by shifting attention from military heroism to the enduring psychological, moral, and social consequences of combat. Through the experiences of Sean "Mac" McBride, Michael McCormick demonstrates that the legacy of war extends beyond the battlefield, manifesting itself in fragmented memory, moral injury, institutional neglect, and the persistent struggle to articulate traumatic experience. Rather than presenting trauma as an individual pathology, the novella reveals it as a condition shaped by ethical conflict, failed testimony, and the collective failure of society to acknowledge the suffering of ordinary soldiers.

Drawing upon the theoretical perspectives of Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Judith Herman, Jonathan Shay, and Brett T. Litz, this study has shown that McCormick employs fragmented narration, embodied memory, sensory imagery, and strategic silence as literary strategies that reproduce the lived experience of trauma rather than merely describing it. The novella's disrupted chronology, restrained language, and emphasis on bodily recollection transform narrative form into an ethical mode of witnessing, enabling readers to experience the instability and incompleteness that characterize traumatic memory.

Equally significant is McCormick's representation of the Vietnam infantryman as a morally conscious individual whose greatest burden lies not only in surviving combat but also in confronting the ethical consequences of war and the indifference of

post-war society. By exploring moral injury, institutional betrayal, and social marginalization, *Across the Pond* challenges dominant narratives that reduce veterans either to heroic symbols or damaged victims. Instead, it restores agency, dignity, and historical visibility to the often-overlooked perspective of the American grunt.

This study therefore argues that *Across the Pond* should be recognized as a significant contribution to Vietnam War literature and trauma studies. Although comparatively neglected within existing scholarship, the novella offers a compelling exploration of trauma, testimony, and moral responsibility that broadens critical understanding of war narratives. By recovering the silenced voice of the ordinary soldier, McCormick not only interrogates the human cost of war but also reminds readers that witnessing requires an engagement with silence, fragmentation, and the ethical truths that conventional historical narratives frequently leave unspoken.

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