

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE 'CLOSED FRONTIER' IN BOBBIE ANN MASON'S *IN COUNTRY*

Yonka Krasteva

University of Veliko Turnovo

Bobbie Ann Mason's novel *In Country* (1989) participates in the general postmodernist decentralisation of dominant cultural paradigms which seeks to collapse the boundaries between margin and centre, male and female, normal and deviant, in an attempt to recover otherness and its suppressed histories. I will argue that Bobbie Ann Mason subverts in a number of ways the monomyth of the heroic questing male on the frontier and replaces this metaphor with the one of home and reading, associated with the intimacy of the *closed frontier*, with maturity and responsibility.

In Country is also a novel about the construction of a female identity and a female rite of passage through a questioning of the essence of received knowledge, and through an examination of the tenuous relationship between language and reality. The heroine's quest for truth in such a context becomes a quest for the meaning of the signifiers that historically and culturally construct the self. Special attention is given to the treatment of otherness in the novel as an access route to self-fashioning, and to the heroine's perception of the strategies of biased representation that encodes difference within the demands of culture.

My analysis shows that the image of the closed frontier is all pervasive in the book with the related images of diaries, letters, pictures, emblems and symbolic gestures, implying hidden meaning. I argue that the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial is the ultimate expression of the modern closed frontier - multilingual, multiracial, genderless and timeless, eliminating traditional asymmetrical representations of otherness. This interpretation invites a re-consideration and a re-formulation of the concept of the frontier which has become a major issue in recent frontier theory and writing.

The frontier discourse has been one of the formative forces behind the American Studies Movement in its attempt to re-interpret and expand the canon of American Literature so as to meet the growing demands of the agenda of 'Multiculturalism'. In recent decades scholars such as Annette Kolodny, Patricia Limerick, Richard Slotkin, Harold Simonson and many others, have been trying to formulate a more viable frontier theory that would give the proper 'code' for the interpretation of previously excluded or marginalized texts, neglected points of view or scorned interpretative positions. Both novelists and cultural historians either try to reconceptualize the meaning of the frontier as an interpretative paradigm for American experience or to reclaim frontier 'space' as a hybridised 'place' where different voices compete for a legitimate existence and equal representation.

Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country* participates in the post-modern decentralisation of dominant cultural paradigms, in the contestation of traditional role models for personality building and of strategies for the literary construction of the subject. The title of the book immediately evokes a central American topos, the wilderness, or 'in country', where the paradigmatic battles between the warriors of the New World and the native Indians took place. Yet the novel is about the recent past, about Vietnam and its aftermath. The tension between the mythic promise of the past and the denial of fulfilment and the betrayal of hope of the present, is skilfully established in the contrast between the meaning of the title, evoking the heroic code of the West, and the subversive implications of the epigraph from Bruce Springsteen's famous song, "Born in the USA", about a Vietnam veteran:

I'm ten years burning down the road
nowhere to run, ain't got nowhere to go.

Through such well-known cultural texts Bobbie Ann Mason establishes the linguistic debate that dominates the book, and defines the heroine's search for the meaning of history and for truth - on one hand the dominant discourse of discovery and conquest, and on the other, the visionary and spiritual discourse of the countercultural revolt. *In Country* is also a book about the construction of a female identity through the contestation of the meaning of widely held national beliefs, mythic concepts and images that construct both reality and the self. In her struggle with language and sign as access routes to building and understanding personhood, the heroine becomes *real* and *available* to herself.

Samantha Hughes, the heroine of the novel, has to discover the meaning of the sacred 'in country' landscape with which Vietnam has been identified and understand how it combines with her past to build her, in a way, unique identity. While most of the questers before Sam placed their hopes on the 'world beyond', on the open frontier, longing for heroic manhood and boundless freedom, she learns to search for meaning and fulfilment within the recognisable and accepted limits that define community. Significantly, the heroine's initiatory journey goes not take her to uncharted new frontiers, but to the heart of the nation - the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial - America's most impressive frontier, multiracial, multilingual, genderless and timeless. Samantha's imaginary 'journey of insight' in the second half of the twentieth century takes an ironic reversal: her discovery of America and self demands a journey from Vietnam (the Orient), where her father had been killed, to the heart of the New Continent. This reversal represents one of the several strategies which Bobbie Ann Mason employs in order to parody the centrality of the frontier myth and its exclusion of women, ethnic minorities and subcultures.

In his study *Beyond the Frontier: Writers, Western Regionalism and a Sense of Place*, Harold Simonson argues that the tension between the promise of the open frontier and the anxieties stirred by the finality of the closed frontier can be resolved in a "synthesis that is grounded in a more concrete sense of actual place" (Simonson 1989, 3) found in regionalism. The latter signifies a real place,

"synonymous with home," a place where we can find "wholeness and axial centredness to people" (Simonson 1989, 3). Thus, the sense of the tragic loss of the open frontier can be sublimated in the realisation of the significance and promise of the archetypal metaphor of home. It is the vision of America as home to all her lost children that informs Samantha's persistent search for the meaning of the closed frontier.

Mainstream American fiction has indulgently celebrated the white male's heroic conquering of space and enemy, his different flights from the demands of society and from responsibility into open spaces. The less attractive metaphor of home (the closed frontier) insists upon commitment, suffering, selflessness and caring, and upon the recognition of human limitations. I argue that the paradigm of home and gendered reading, as defined by Annette Kolodny (1984, 451-68), is germane to the novel's celebration of human bonds and love. Bobbie Ann Mason's heroine undertakes an anguished emotional, intellectual and spiritual journey through history and to selfhood and truth, very different from the one on which her adolescent male predecessors had embarked.

In the novel this paradigm shift signals an important re-orientation in terms of values. In many ways the difference between the paradigm of conquest and the archetypal consecration of home, and hence between the psychological and ideological implications of the open and the closed frontier, can be illustrated through the difference between the Old and the New Testament. The narrative of the Old Testament is modelled on the paradigm of conquest, where conquest is encoded as a male adventure. But already here it is envisaged as a means to an end and not as a mode of being or a routine experience. The sacred goal of this long and arduous pilgrimage is the attainment of home.

The New Testament establishes the radical shift to the paradigm of home. "Make your home in me as I make mine in you" (John, 15:5), Christ urges his followers, and gives assurance that, "If you make my word your home you will indeed be my disciples" (John, 8:34). There are numerous references to homes and houses turned into temples of the living God through Christ's consecration. They partake of immortality, for the kingdom of heaven is also envisaged as a house. "There are many dwelling places in my Father's house", Christ says, "otherwise, should I have said to you, I am going away to prepare a home for you?" (John, 14:2). The language through which the new code is transmitted is also different from the rhetoric of the Old Testament; it is the language of parable and metaphor, and it is indicative that Christ imparts to his followers the art of interpretation, so that they can divine the true meaning of God's Word, of his deeds and manifestations. The paradigm of home and reading then, is the one on which the Christian community is established and it is seen as a projection of the heavenly order. In this sense, the paradigm of home is an archetype, while the myth of the frontier, which has appropriated the Old Testament model of conquest, is history disguised as an archetype.

Samantha Hughes's search for the meaning of history and knowledge of self is also a search for family and home and for all they stand for. She ends up with a

curious kind of regenerated family involving three generations - herself, her uncle Emmett, a Vietnam veteran, and her grandmother. They are bound together not so much by their blood kinship as by their spiritual kinship. A new kind of genealogy is established, defined not by the Law of the Father, but by the perception of the Other. It is the shared awareness of the significance of otherness for identity formation and for an understanding of history that is the basis for the resurrection of the family, and the absolution of ancestral sin.

The metaphor of the closed frontier implies both the turning of 'alien' space into intimate 'place' and the sense of commitment that accompanies this process. Commitment, on the other hand, is associated with responsibility and maturity. The novel, though, advances a post-modern perception of place. It is not just landscape or open spaces which satisfy the hero's longing for freedom and adventure but a Foucauldian 'site' and 'location', that is, an environment that can itself be read like a text in which contestant voices compete for power. Subject to reading are national monuments and flags, symbolic gestures, landscape, posters, advertisements and TV images. Throughout the book the image of the wall remains all important (with accompanying images of pictures, diaries, letters, emblems, suggestive of hidden meaning), and culminates in its most commanding realisation - the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial.

In the opening chapter Sam, Emmett and grandmother are travelling on I-64, on their way to Washington. The final chapter describes their encounter with the monument. For a while the three travellers are stranded with a transmission problem, and before they resume their journey we learn what happened during the summer after Samantha's graduation. The contents of the novel are 'walled in', the image of the memorial wall thus structurally implying a closure. The framed structure of the novel and the heroine's mental and spiritual search for selfhood also imply a closed, familiar, natural and internal landscape, inverting the open-ended male quest narrative with its vision of boundless space and limitless opportunities. Significantly, it is the journey through one's 'inner closet' that does not require terrain or open space but knows no boundaries or restrictions.

It is indicative that the protagonist's search for her father, for selfhood and truth should begin on the day of her graduation which marks the end of adolescence and the beginning of adulthood. Out of school, fatherless, recently separated from her mother, and taking care of her "messed up" uncle Emmett, Sam hardly knows where to begin. Placing her heroine in isolation Bobbie Ann Mason forces her to experience the 'identity crisis', which culturally has been accorded only to boys. Carolyn Heilbrun argues that the identity crisis is of paramount importance for autonomy:

All societies, from the earliest and most primitive to today's, have ceremoniously taken the boy from the female domain and urged his identity as male, as a responsible unfeminine individual, upon him. The girl undergoes no such ceremony, but she pays for serenity of passage with a lack of selfhood and

the will to autonomy that only the struggle for identity can offer. (Heilbrun 1979, 104)

The narrative locus of interest in *In Country* is the middle stage of ritual transition, defined by Arnold Van Gennep in his classic *Rites of Passage* as liminality. It is the formative stage upon whose completion the person emerges with a new identity and is either re-integrated into society as a responsible adult, is trapped by it, or decides to leave it entirely. Liminality foregrounds the script of painful change in the process of individuation. It is bracketed, as in *In Country*, both by time and space. It is the time and space where personal urges and social norms conflict and are played out. The protagonists have to be placed in isolation in order to perceive themselves as their own subjects, and engage actively in self-fashioning.

By examining the constructions of actual events, Samantha gradually becomes aware of the fact that the stories we tell about history, the form in which we get history and its impact, are more revealing about human nature than the events themselves. Her probings into history involve the breaking of surfaces and crossing of boundaries, going beyond the written word on the page, beyond the image in the picture in an attempt to comprehend their hidden meaning. The heroine realises that her access to the kind of knowledge that would give her understanding of the past and help her define herself is blocked either by the denial of the people around her to talk about the war, or by the obfuscating messages of the "dull history books" which didn't even say what it was like to be at war there, and which "got her bogged down in manifestos and State Department documents" (Mason 1989, 77).

By casting herself in the role of the detective in order to reconstruct the family history and to find out who she is, Samantha departs in yet another significant way from the course of action which adolescent male predecessors have taken. She discards the illusion that one can, like Gatsby, "spring from a Platonic conception of himself". The quest for truth in such a context becomes a quest for the meaning of the signifiers that historically and culturally determine and construct the self. The first signifier bestowed upon a person is her/his name, which automatically defines him/her terms of class, gender and social status. Thus, it is quite natural for the heroine to begin her search at this point. "If she cannot know a simple fact, like the source of her name, what can she know for sure?" (Mason 1989, 77), reasons the girl.

One day Emmett tells her that it was her father who gave her the name. She is surprised, for she had assumed her mother had named her after a movie star. Why had her father chosen this name? What did this choice mean? Sam hopes to get an answer to the questions in the letters her father wrote to her mother. In one of the letters he tells Irene to name the boy "Samuel". "It is in the Bible", he goes on. "If it is a girl, name it Samantha ... I think it is a name in the Chronicles...Sam felt cheated. He was counting on a boy. Samantha was an afterthought" (Mason 1989, 261). The theme of betrayal, introduced at the beginning of the novel by Bruce Springsteen's verse, here acquires a

concrete reference, the betrayal of the daughter by the father. Pained by disappointment, Sam reaches for the Bible, only to feel betrayed again, for "... there was no Samantha in either the first or the second book of Chronicles".

Traditionally, the search for the father signifies a search for authority, knowledge and moral guidance. In Lacanian terms the Father stands for the Symbolic Other (different from the Imaginary (M)other, and the absolute Other - God), the symbolic order into which the child is being introduced by language. Its imposition on the individual marks the transition from the mirror stage of infantile narcissism towards the Oedipal encounter, which helps orient him/her towards the Symbolic in a 'proper' way as prescribed by culture. As Lacan has argued, the Symbolic Other may be of either gender, but in a patriarchal culture, the position can be occupied only by men. Significantly, Lacan calls the Symbolic Other, the Law-of-the-name-of-the-Father.

In *In Country*, patriarchal authority, embodied by preacher, father, and boy friend, is persistently subverted. It is the boy father who displays the traditional 'womanish' characteristics and not his daughter. Paradoxically, when Sam 'meets' her father, they are the same age, for he died when he was nineteen, arrested in his adolescence. "The soldier boy in the picture never changed", reflects the heroine. "In a way that made him dependable. But he seemed so innocent" (Mason 1989, 94). The daughter is knowledgeable and experienced while the father is ignorant and "innocent". Sam is shocked by the naïveté of his letters: "He sounded like a preacher ... They sounded strangely frivolous, as if they were on a vacation, writing back home wish you were here postcards ... In his letters Dwayne was just a kid" (Mason 1989, 274).

Sam recognises the 'Manifest Destiny' rhetoric in Dwayne's perception of America and the World, intoning the patriotic pronouncements of the Methodist preacher at her graduation ceremony. The heroine can perceive clearly the mechanism through which cultural knowledge is transmitted, and this helps her to avoid the mythic entrapments into which her father fell. She interprets the conflict as another "crusade for democracy", a war for power and domination, when, as she puts it, "America's got to put on its cowboy boots and show somebody a thing or two" (Mason 1989, 318), asserting her aggressive, macho image.

It is clear to Sam that her father has fully internalised his culture's masculine values with their insistence on hero worship. Ultimately hero worship blinds the person to his own needs and potentials for development and fulfilment for he cannot perceive himself as subject in his own right. The worshipper is stimulated to imitate the object of worship and not to explore the basic human urge for personal growth. Not surprisingly, in his enthusiastic accounts of his war performance, Dwayne is not aware of his abject position and arrested development, of the fact that he is enamoured by the mirror reflection of somebody else's image. "Great guys here", he boasts in his diary. "We are one fine team. If Hot Shot didn't get so mad we wouldn't be half as good as we are. He really knows how to run us. Just like Coach Jones in basketball. We are talking him into re-enlisting. We say the free world needs him" (Mason 1989, 292). The last sentence is charged with irony, for it reveals Dwayne's blindness to his own enslavement by the very idols of brutal force that he worships. But then, idolatry is enslavement, for it demands the renunciation of self and surrender of will power. Yet, the worshippers entertain the

illusion that they are free to choose for themselves.

Sam rejects the traditional assumptions of war as the ultimate test for patriotism and manhood, and of its perception as a national game. She insists upon another kind of heroism, the heroism of taking responsibility for one's own actions. Casting oneself in the role of an innocent victim, the way Emmett has done, is not enough. As Patricia Limerick demonstrates in her study, *The Legacy of Conquest*, this attitude is deeply ingrained in the American psyche: "Contrary to all the West's associations with self-reliance and individual responsibility, misfortune has usually caused white Westerners to cast themselves in the role of innocent victims" (Limerick 1987, 42). The appropriation of Christ's sacrifice as the ultimate icon in which the American soldier is cast, significantly expiates him of guilt and sin and insists upon his righteousness and innocence. As long as Emmett is passive, does not take action, and does not recognise his responsibility to the living, he is also betraying Sam. "You think, you can get away with everything because you are a vet, but you can't", she writes in a note to Emmett. "On the table is the diary my daddy kept ... Is that what it was like over there? If it was, then you can just forget about me. Don't try to find me. You're on your own. Goodbye. Sam" (Mason 1989, 298).

Haunted by guilt, Sam is tempted to ignore the past, to "... just forget about her father and dismiss the whole Hughes clan with him" (Mason 1989, 295). But she has already learned enough to know that instead of ignoring a destructive background, one should strive to transcend it, in order to become available to oneself. "She had a morbid imagination", the girl reflects, "but it has always been like a horror movie. Now everything seemed suddenly so real, it enveloped her, like a skunk smell, but she felt she had to live with it a long time before she could take a bath" (Mason 1989, 296). The bath implies spiritual cleansing and the re-birth of the self, both of which are strongly associated with the heroic frontier myth.

Sam decides to explore the relevance of the myth of rebirth on the frontier to her own experience. "If men went to war for women and unborn generations", she ponders, "then she was going to find out what they went through", and she decides to spend a night "in country", at the snake infested Cawood's Pond, "because it was the last place in Western Kentucky where a person could really face the wild" (Mason 1989, 299). Her response to the wilderness/nature is notably different from the traditional male response to it. The 'in country' episode is patterned on the motif of the harrowing of hell, which corresponds to the struggle of the hero with the dragon in classic myth, where the monster stands for chaos and death. The most appalling monsters the heroine has to wrestle with, though, are not to be encountered in nature, but in her culture. "In the deepening dark, she struggled against Dracula images invading her mind. The soundtrack at the back of her mind, she realised, was from *Apocalypse Now*, the Doors moaning ominously, 'this is the end, the children are insane'" (Mason 1989, 309). Her apocalyptic visions are in stark contrast with the landscape around her, which is teeming with life, but is perfectly serene. Sam experiences a sense of maternal ambience which is enhanced by the sight of the mother raccoon taking care of her baby raccoons.

It is not by chance that at this particular moment she will once again think about her mother as a point of reference, as a guide post, and try to imagine how Irene would

interpret her actions. "Maybe her mother would think the idea was not so ridiculous. Her mother had done braver things" (Mason 1989, 307). The 'in country' episode foregrounds the importance of the spiritual continuation between mother and daughter for the re-definition of the family bonds and the re-establishment of a state of normalcy, based not on coercion, but on the code of reciprocity. The relationship between mother and daughter furnishes a new model of the mentor figure, flexible and stimulating by its insistence on openness to others and a permanent state of awareness. Irene never imposes her opinion on her daughter and her authority is far from obtrusive. By her physical absence, leaving Sam in isolation, so that she can experience her 'identity crisis', the mother enhances her mentor's power to facilitate a female rite of passage. At the same time at which the heroine rejects the frontier rite of 'regeneration through violence', she is being initiated into the code of reciprocity sustained by the ritual of catering.

The 'in country' episode clearly demonstrates the difference in a male and female response to nature and its inscription in culture. In the heroic paradigm of conquest, man is pitted against nature in an attempt to subjugate her in order to proudly assert his manhood, a symbolic action often identified as the rape of the land. Ironically, in the morning, having survived in the 'wilderness', Sam experiences a sense of real danger, for she realises that somebody is moving in her direction. It is only Emmett looking for her, but it is indicative that the heroine should experience danger as masculine. This response also bespeaks a gendered representation of danger in the cultural discourse. Women need not go to the wilderness to confront danger and fight monsters. Their most haunting image of threat is sexual violence, which is part of female experience in a patriarchal culture.

The idea of the prime value of physical survival inherent in the Western monomyth is also ridiculed. In the morning, just before the arrival of the assumed rapist, Sam reasons: "She had survived. But she did not know what to do. She wished the bird would come. If the bird would come, then she would leave" (Mason 1989, 310). Apparently the heroine is disappointed with her 'wilderness experience'. She is looking for the same bird, the egret, for which Emmett has been looking for two years. The bird clearly symbolises the hankering of the soul and insists upon the needs of the spirit. Sam's and Emmett's search for the bird affirms the higher value of spiritual over physical survival, for as Christ teaches, according to St. John's Gospel, "It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh has nothing to offer" (John, 7:11). The birds acquire sacramental significance and the otherness they represent is Christ - theologically our other for God.

Sam feels incomplete and by implication the male hero in the frontier myth is incomplete. Both Emmett and Tom (Sam's Vietnam veteran boy friend) return emasculated from their wilderness/war exploits, and cannot relate to women. Survival in the wilderness, as has been already pointed out, has the same value as the victory of the hero over the dragon in the classic myth of initiation. But his rite of initiation does not end at the point it does for the American hero. After his victory over the monster, the hero, in Joseph Campbell's words, "has to marry the Goddess of the World" (Campbell 1968, 120) in order to enhance his powers and achieve wholeness. It is only through the encounter with women that he can learn to accept different aspects of himself, become

knowledgeable and experienced. By ignoring the final stage in the initiation rite, the American hero remains arrested in his childhood fantasies of heroism, in the narcissistic state of the mirror stage. The imaginary and the real West become a place where, as Leslie Fiedler aptly puts it, "men can avoid growing up" (Fiedler 1966, 96).

Sam's harrowing of hell does not envelope her experience in a heroic aura, but affords the more unsettling encounter with otherness, and hence, with one's unconscious. Remembering her father's and Emmett's war stories, the heroine gradually perceives the effect of the politics of asymmetrical representation of otherness. The story about the hooch that blew up is very revealing in this respect. "The scene was like the wolf and the three piglets", Emmett recounts. "There was a pig squealing. When the hooch fell down, the pig ran around, squealing. Somebody shot it, but it still danced until it fell down dead. And then the pig got barbecued" (Mason 1989, 225). It is quite clear that language makes you what you are. Vocabulary choices reveal traditional attitudes of contempt and aggression embedded in the institutionalised discourse which encodes otherness to the demands of culture. As Edward Said has convincingly argued in *Orientalism*, such attitudes of cultural hostility keep the region and its people conceptually emasculated" (Said 1978, 256). The representations of Indians, Arabs, Vietnamese in the discourse of the West as deprived, inferior, in need of rhetorical as well as material cultivation is entirely arbitrary. In the culturally constructed signifier for the other the sign has been mistaken for reality. Sam gradually becomes aware of the fact that attitudes towards war, otherness, ethnicity, political correctness, are also cultural constructs and it matters a lot who has control over their representation. Reclaiming otherness involves a questioning of the essence and relevance of received knowledge, an examination of the tenuous relationship between language and 'reality', and an awareness of the 'conservatism' of official discourse, exhibited in its reluctance to coin new words to describe a strange environment or landscape and its persistence in applying familiar, old codes to map out unknown and all too distant terrain.

The heroine is worried that it is so difficult to imagine the land of the Vietnamese. She is aware of the fact that her knowledge of Vietnam comes from the movies that were filmed in Mexico. Looking at American GIs proudly marching in corn fields she asks herself: "Did corn actually grow in Vietnam?". Once she begins to ask such questions, she easily finds out that in the national script the landscape of Vietnam had also to be 're-written', in order to fit cherished notions of the 'sacred past'. Vietnam is transformed into 'in country', a new frontier devised by history for the test of basic American values, for the glorious repetition of the wars with the Indians.

Samantha's newly acquired competence of interpreting textured environment and her awareness of the textuality of history are convincingly revealed in the way in which she interprets the meaning of the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial:

The memorial cuts a V in the ground like the wings of an abstract bird, huge and headless... At the bottom of the wall is a granite trough, and on the edge of it the sunlight reflects the names just above, in mirror writing, upside down ... The shiny surface of the wall reflects the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington

monument at opposite angles. If she moves slightly to her left, she sees the monument, if she moves the other way she sees the reflection of the flag opposite. Both the monument and the flag seem like arrogant gestures, like the country giving the finger to the dead boys in the hole in the ground. (Mason 1989, 344-45)

The key words in this passage are "wall" and "hole", creating an entirely funerary atmosphere, doing away with notions of glory, national pride and victory. This unexpected manifestation of the frontier concept destabilises traditional social constructions of aesthetic, moral and political values. Maya Lin's impressive design shocked American sensibility to such an extent that soon a correction was added - the Frederick Hart addition - in order to soothe the feelings of uneasiness and anxiety, and to honour the cause.

It is on this funerary, man-made frontier and not in the wilderness/nature that Sam experiences ritualistic death and rebirth, for it is here that she finally solves the riddle of her name. After locating her father's name on the wall, she is shocked to read her own name on it: "SAM ALAN HUGHES ... She touches her name, how odd it feels, as though all the names in America have been used to decorate this monument", (Mason 1989, 351) she reflects. "The reality of death hits her in broad daylight", and she is shocked to realise that she feels "like giving birth to the wall", which could be interpreted as a recognition of human limitations and a desire to end the mythic search for new frontiers, to confront the legacy of conquest and experience America as home. Both Sam and Emmett display a ritualistic response to death and rebirth, for "Emmett faces the wall as though he were watching birds" (Mason 1989, 348). He, too, has come through his harrowing of hell to reclaim his lost self. The end of the novel marks the closure of the liminal stage in Sam and Emmett's rite of initiation. They have succeeded in determining their identity against cultural pressures by celebrating otherness and letting go of the obsession with boundaries, hierarchy and exclusion.

The analysis so far gives support to the thesis that *In Country* can be read as a text that participates in a new kind of frontier discourse which perceives boundaries as dynamic sites of competing voices, struggling for a legitimate space of their own on a contested terrain. This contested terrain is American history itself. As a condensed, symbolic interpretation of recent American history, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial has multiple implications. With its funerary design it subverts the official version of American history as a glorious crusade for democracy. On the other hand, it becomes the ultimate manifestation of the closed frontier/home, a highly hybridised text that does not recognise centre and margin, high and low. The cultural assumptions about difference and hierarchy break down and strategies of asymmetrical representations are rendered ineffective. Sam and Emmett experience the wall as a new, but intimate frontier, multi-lingual, multi-racial, foregrounding not synthesis and assimilation of difference, but simultaneity or multiplicity of voices and identities. This interpretation of the frontier echoes Annette Kolodny's recommendation to thematize the frontier "as a multiplicity of ongoing first encounters over time and land, rather than as a linear chronology of successive discoveries and discreet settlements" (Kolodny 1992, 17). Literary texts like

Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country* ask us to address the implications of the neglected or unrecognised frontiers that we cross in our everyday transactions - physical, as well as psychological, intellectual, mental, and sexual, in order to negotiate the tensions between them so as to make our common terrain a more comfortable place to live in. By creating a narrative about a female rite of passage, Bobbie Ann Mason not only decentres the dominant cultural paradigm of discovery and conquest by substituting for it the paradigm of home and reading, but also expands the frontiers of one's cultural horizon, one's region and sensibility.

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