138
211
THS

THESIS
5729 1179

This is to certify that the
thesis entitled

MULTIPLYING BY MAYBE: TIM O'BRIEN AND THE TRANSMISSIBILITY OF THE VIETNAM EXPERIENCE

presented by

Christen M. Clark

has been accepted towards fulfillment
of the requirements for the

Master of Arts degree in English Literature

Major Professor's Signature

December 5, 2003

Date

MSU is an Affirmative Action/Equal Opportunity Institution

LIBRARY
Michigan State
University

PLACE IN RETURN BOX to remove this checkout from your record.
TO AVOID FINES return on or before date due.
MAY BE RECALLED with earlier due date if requested.

DATE DUE	DATE DUE	DATE DUE
APR 29 2013		

6/01 c:/CIRC/DateDue.p65-p.15

MULTIPLYING BY MAYBE: TIM O'BRIEN AND THE TRANSMISSIBILTY OF THE VIETNAM EXPERIENCE

By

Christen M. Clark

A THESIS

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

2003

ABSTRACT

MULTIPLYING BY MAYBE: TIM O'BRIEN AND THE TRANSMISSIBILTY OF THE VIETNAM EXPERIENCE

by

Christen M. Clark

For noted novelist and Vietnam War veteran Tim O'Brien, "experience is most accurately represented not by slavish repetition of factual happenings, as they might be presented in a history book, but by "heart-truth," the way the individual understands and processes events within him or herself. In his 1990 book The Things They Carried, O'Brien uses various strategies to convey this "heart-truth." First, through his narrator, he twists standard notions of truth in order to call the "reality" of the war experience into question, which performatively demonstrates that what the reader perceives as reality is, instead, already and always a construction. O'Brien also highlights various types of truth through repetition and ghostly imagery. The narrative layering of Things ultimately conveys to the reader the multitudinous nature of the Vietnam War soldier's traumatic experience and can, perhaps, move us toward a more complete conception of what it means to represent the traumatic experience in literature and to what degree the affective "heart-truth" of experience may be transmitted to the reader, working against the common assertion that the events and emotions of war are not able to be fully and accurately represented in any medium.

"That's what fiction is for. It's for getting at the truth when the truth isn't sufficient for the truth."

--Tim O'Brien

"Yes was no longer yes, no was no longer no, maybe was more certainly maybe"

--David Halberstam

I. Introduction

For noted novelist and Vietnam War veteran Tim O'Brien, "truth" is a vexed concept. In a 1999 lecture at Brown University, on the topic of "Writing Vietnam," he pointed out that, as a writer, "the literal truth is ultimately, to me, irrelevant. What matters to me is the *heart-truth* [. . .]. In the fundamental human way, the ways we think about our dream lives, and our moral lives, and our spiritual lives, what matters is *what happens in our hearts*" (emphasis added).[1] For O'Brien, experience is most accurately represented not by slavish repetition of factual happenings, as they might be presented in a history book, but by "heart-truth," the way the individual understands and processes events within him or herself. In his 1990 book The Things They Carried, O'Brien uses shifting genre and point of view, non-linear temporality, filmic and photographic imagery, and other techniques to convey the fractured nature of a soldier's participation in the Vietnam War. In doing so, he works against the common assertion that the events and emotions of war are not able to be fully and accurately represented in any medium, and constructs his own unique conceptions of truth, memory, and experience.

[1] www.stg.brown.edu/projects/WritingVietnam/ obrien.html View date 11-14-2003

Critics often read the Vietnam War as a mythic American event. Lucas Carpenter, for example, points out that Vietnam War writing "demonstrate[s] the multi-perspectival, relativistic nature of America's Vietnam experience and the futility of any attempt to identify, much less communicate (especially via language), any fundamental meaning or truth attaching to or derived from the war" (32). Yet while Carpenter and others emphasize *America's* understanding of Vietnam, rather than the *individual's*, O'Brien focuses, in Things, on private war encounters and the understanding that grows from them.[2] He looks at the Vietnam War as "All those stories," which are individual and are "Not bloody stories, necessarily. Happy stories, too, and even a few peace stories" (35), rather than one all-encompassing national narrative. In doing so, he insists on a distinction between universal "truth" and private, personal truth, in part because "A good lie, if nobly told, for good reason, seems to me preferable to a very boring and pedestrian truth, which can lie, too."[3] Furthermore, in the course of pinning down certain areas of experience, as a storyteller, "You start sometimes with an incident that truly happened [. . .] and you carry it forward by inventing incidents that did not in fact occur but that nonetheless help to clarify and explain" (O'Brien 159). Lies, then, become generative tools, used to get at something more true than literal or universal truth, O'Brien's personal "heart-truth."

---

[2] This is perhaps a more appropriate way to represent the experience because, as Tobey Herzog points out, Vietnam was, more than any previous American war, an individual experience. This individuality was due in part to the way in which "staffing" was handled: "Instead of replacing whole units, the American military replaced individuals [. . .] heightening the new soldier's feelings of isolation and problems of adjustment, increasing experienced soldiers' feeling of loss as friends rotated back to the States, and intensifying the rotating soldiers' guilt as they left their friends in combat" (55). The individual soldier struggled to fully integrate with his ever-rotating cast of comrades, and was thus forced to deal with the experience, and its aftermath, primarily in solitude.

[3] www.stg.brown.edu/projects/WritingVietnam/ obrien.html View date 11-14-2003

It is around this notion of "heart-truth," which remains unspoken in Things, that Tim, O'Brien's eponymous narrator, circles his representation of the Vietnam soldier's traumatic experience.[4] In "Notes," Tim says that he tells stories as "a way of grabbing people by the shirt and explaining exactly what had happened to me, how I'd allowed myself to get dragged into a wrong war, all the mistakes I'd made, all the terrible things I had seen and done" (158). His repetition of "me" and "I" in this passage emphasizes the personal value and nature of his tales, yet Tim also insists that his work is not intended only for his own benefit. He claims that, above all, "I did not look on my work as therapy, and still don't" (159). Instead, he is explicitly concerned with bridging the gap between reader and writer and creating a specific affect in the reader. Addressing the reader, Tim says "I want you to feel what I felt" (179). This book represents the means by which the author's "heart-truth" may be evoked and transferred to the reader.

O'Brien uses various strategies to convey this "heart-truth" in Things. First, through his narrator, he twists standard notions of truth in order to call the "reality" of the war experience into question. This distortion demonstrates that what the reader perceives as reality is, instead, already and always a construction. The performativity of this act pulls the reader into the story, as a participant in its formation, and recreates the soldier's affective experience within the reader. O'Brien also highlights various types of truth through repetition, what I will call a kind of circling, which destabilizes the reader's preconceptions about the war and the assumptions she builds while reading Things. This

---

[4] O'Brien, by giving his narrator his own name and many of his own characteristics and life events, invites the reader to read him as echoing the author's own voice. It is difficult for the reader to avoid unconsciously conflating the two. This also creates an immediate difficulty for the critic attempting to write on the text: How do you distinguish between the two Tim O'Briens? For the purposes of this paper, I will refer to the author as O'Brien and the narrator as Tim. I will also assume here that Tim is the narrator of each section of the book, though there are sections where this is not explicitly stated.

circling pattern helps to show, as Tim says, that "the truths are contradictory" (80), and constantly shifting, but no less valuable (or true) for this inconsistency. Finally, O'Brien uses ghostly imagery, another kind of repetition, to represent the heart of experience as something that will forever haunt both the experiencer and the reader. The narrative layering of Things ultimately conveys to the reader the multitudinous nature of the Vietnam War soldier's traumatic experience and can, perhaps, move us toward a more complete conception of to what degree the affective "heart-truth" of experience may be transmitted to the reader, and what it means to represent the traumatic experience in literature.

II. Performing Vietnam

For the narrator, Tim, there are multiple kinds of truths, many of which are confusing and contradictory, but all of which ultimately fuse together in The Things They Carried to create O'Brien's "heart-truth." These include material and photographic truths, as well as a kind of veracity Tim calls "surreal seemingness" (71), and, finally, "story-truth" and "happening-truth" (180). In fact, in war, Tim claims "Almost everything is true," at the same time as "Almost nothing is true" (81). The narrator of Things is like a magician, revealing the secret behind his tricks and thus undermining the premises of truth and fiction upon which the reader bases her understanding of both experience and literature. What is presumably true is shown here to be equally untrue and vice versa, depending on the angle from which it is viewed. In exploring the blurry line between truth and reality, Things becomes performative, generating within the reader the ambiguity it describes.

In fact, the reader's truth assumptions are called into question before the text even begins. Things is filed under "fiction" in bookstores, according to the genre classification listed on the back of the book, yet it is unclear what sort of fiction it is. The text is arranged as a series of short sections, which are not chapters, exactly, but are also not necessarily short stories. Some can stand on their own, such as the title story and "On the Rainy River," which have been published separately in fiction anthologies and magazines. Others, however, such as "Good Form" and "Notes" are metanarratives designed to explain earlier stories, which cannot produce their intended affect if separated

from the stories with which they are paired. In addition, the same characters reappear throughout the book, including the narrator, Tim, as they would in a novel.

The presumption of fiction, too, is confounded by the text. Things is prefaced by the standard disclaimer that "This is a work of fiction. Except for a few details regarding the author's own life, all the incidents, names, and characters are imaginary" (copyright page). This disclaimer is followed by a dedication page, on which O'Brien dedicates the book to "Jimmy Cross, Norman Bowker, Rat Kiley, Mitchell Sanders, Henry Dobbins, and Kiowa." The reader first assumes, of course, that these are "real" people, O'Brien's comrades in his own true-life war experience, as books are generally not dedicated to fictional characters. However, this assumption is overturned when the reader is introduced, in the first sentence of the book, to "First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross" (1). A presumably real person from the dedication, Jimmy Cross, has, true to his name, crossed over into the fictional text and become a character. This confusion is only heightened as the book continues and the reader realizes that O'Brien's narrator shares his name, which is a convention typically only used in memoir or autobiography, and as the narrator himself uses metanarrative to destabilize the truth of the events he relates.

Is Things, then, a memoir that has been misclassified? Is it part true story and part fiction? The text does not definitively answer these questions. Instead, this genre ambiguity forces the reader to address his own assumptions about the point at which a text becomes fictional. We tend, as readers, to read "true" stories differently than we do fiction. We expect them, unconsciously, to teach us something about the world, and are more disturbed by the horrors contained within a book's pages if we think they "really happened." We also tend to assume silently that there is such a thing as a "true" piece of

literature, that experience can somehow be transcribed exactly into the written word, captured "just as it happened." By shaking up the reader's genre assumptions, O'Brien prepares his reader to receive a personal understanding of the way in which "In war you lose your sense of the definite, hence your sense of truth itself" (82).

Throughout Things, Tim takes up the issue of truth, forcing the reader to repeatedly revise her definitions of reality and fiction. In metanarrative sections, such as "How to Tell a True War Story" and "Notes," O'Brien gives the reader a behind-the-scenes look at representational strategies. These stories at first seem to be true, because of their imitation of the voice of the "real" author, O'Brien. Tim begins "How to Tell a True War Story" by insisting that "This is true," repeating the focus on truth which occurs in the title of the section. This insistence, of course, immediately plants a seed of doubt in the reader's mind. Does he mean *really* true, in the world outside the text? What does "true" even mean? Tim's metanarratives simultaneously call their own representation of truth into question, so that the reader sees the artifice behind the surface story. Even here, Tim, posing as O'Brien, contradicts his own stories. For example, halfway through "How to Tell a True War Story," Tim prefaces a story about Rat Kiley shooting a baby Water Buffalo by asserting that "I've told it before—many times, many versions—but here's what actually happened" (78). However, at the end of the story, he reverses himself and says, "Beginning to end [. . .] it's all made up. Every goddamn detail—the mountains and the river and especially that poor dumb baby buffalo" (85). These "true" metanarrative interludes turn out to be no more stable or "real" than any "true war story."

The issue of veracity remains unstable throughout "How to Tell a True War Story." War, and the telling of it, Tim indicates, is not as black and white as we would all like it to be, because pure truth is often replaced with "seemingness." He says: "In any war story, but especially a true one, it's difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen. What seems to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way. The angles of vision are skewed" (71). The experience itself is slanted, right from the start, because of the inevitably faulty vision of the experiencer, as well as the vagaries of memory and other perceptual faculties. As an example of this distortion, Tim talks about the way in which, "When a booby trap explodes, you close your eyes and duck and float outside yourself. When a guy dies, like Curt Lemon, you look away and then look back for a moment and then look away again" (71). As events are occurring, the experiencer is already constructing the narrative which will become memory, looking away and thus willfully ignoring certain parts of the events, as well as simply missing certain portions because of natural sensory limitations. In traumatic situations, "The pictures get jumbled; you tend to miss a lot. And then afterward, when you go to tell about it, there is always that surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it *seemed* (71). There are potentially as many "true" tellings of an event as there are people who witness it, and each one of these is part of the individual experiencer's "heart-truth."

By openly discussing the ways in which experience is pulled together across gaps and misconceptions, Tim focuses the reader's attention on representational strategies and the issue of literary truth. It is easy for the reader of Things to assume, almost unconsciously, because of the eponymous narrator and the places where the author seems

to break in and directly address the reader, that the text is truth only thinly disguised as fiction. Yet Tim's tactics make the reader question the veracity of his stories, and what his motives are for telling them here and now, and in this way. This produces an affect in the reader that is similar to that of the soldier, who can't tell what's real and what only "seemed to happen." A true war story, according to O'Brien, recognizes this unending ambiguity. In fact, he claims, " a true war story does not depend upon that kind of truth. Absolute occurrence is irrelevant" (83), because "story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth" (179). The artistic construction can sometimes be more true than the original. As Tim says, "In many cases a true war story cannot be believed. If you believe it be skeptical. It's a question of credibility. Often the crazy stuff is true and the normal stuff isn't, because the normal stuff is necessary to make you believe the truly incredible craziness" (71). Expectations are constantly overturned in Tim's version of a true war story. The literary truths which these upsets serve are another aspect of O'Brien's "heart-truth."

Tim also suggests, by focusing on the minute details of the war experience, that heart-truth is deeply dependent on material particularities. In the title story of Things, he presents what at first appears to be a totalizing description of the physical realties of war. Early in the story, Tim lists the equipment carried by the soldiers, saying that, "Among the necessities or near-necessities were P-38 can openers, pocket knives, heat tabs, wristwatches, dog tags, mosquito repellent, chewing gum, candy, cigarettes, salt tablets, packets of Kool-Aid, lighters, matches, sewing kits, Military Payment Certificates, C rations, and two or three canteens of water" (2). Tim lists what the reader would expect a soldier to carry, C-rations, dog tags, and pocket knives, but also unexpected, and

seemingly minor items, such chewing gum and Kool-Aid, which creates the impression that he is trying to list everything carried by the men, and that such a list is, in fact, possible. This is reinforced by the way in which he follows this first list with the almost scientific comment that "Together, these items weighed between 15 and 20 pounds, depending upon a man's habits or rate of metabolism" (2).

Toby Herzog suggests that "The reason why soldiers engage in these routines, rituals, and surface details of war is, of course, an attempt to keep from thinking about the realities of their existence – the hidden truths and their innate fears. Such routines, or coping mechanisms, establish order and comfort within the chaos of the battlefield" (44). The reader, too, is oddly comforted by the details of war that Tim presents. These, we think, are things we can know, even if we understand nothing else about Vietnam. Yet even if Tim could list all the items the men carried, along with their official purposes, he could never possibly capture all of their "off-label" uses. The reader realizes this as Tim goes on to explain logically the reasons for carrying various items: "Because the land was mined and booby-trapped," and "Because you could die so quickly," and "Because the monsoons were wet" (3), the men carried flak jackets, bandages, and rain ponchos. However, in war, the "becauses" get twisted as items get repurposed, like "when Ted Lavender was shot, [and] they used his poncho to wrap him up, then to carry him across the paddy, then to lift him into the chopper that took him away" (3). The poncho carried for protection "because the monsoons were wet" instead becomes a body bag. The reader's causal expectations are confounded and our conceptions of "reality" and its representability are thus called into question.

Another tool Tim uses to get at "heart-truth" and the way it is constructed is cinematic imagery. Movies are generally considered to be wholly fictional, but, in Tim's usage, they cross the line into "real life," and offer another way that reality can be constructed, even as it is occurring for the first time. Tim tells the reader that, sometimes in battle, "you lie there watching the story happen in your head" (82), as if watching a movie of your own life. This is similar to the reader's experience of reading the words on the page and processing them into a story we then "watch" in our heads, which becomes another way in which the reader is asked to reproduce the soldier's experiences of perception and memory.

Tim also explains that the soldier takes on a variety of personas, literally playing out roles from the war movies with which he was raised. For example, after Tim is shot in the field, he says, "For a long time I lay there all alone, listening to the battle, thinking *I've been shot, I've been shot*: all those Gene Autry movies I'd seen as a kid. In fact, I almost smiled, except then I started to think I might die" (189). Haunted by ghosts of war movies past, Tim is struck by a period of unreality, as if watching a wounded movie character, rather than himself. This is reinforced when he says that in war : "It's like you're in a movie. There's a camera on you, so you begin acting, you're somebody else" (207). The soldier acts as if he is being watched, taking on a role that goes beyond his individual psyche. Tim goes on to say that "You think of all the films you've seen, Audie Murphy and Gary Cooper and the Cisco Kid, all those heroes, and you can't help falling back on them as models of proper comportment [. . .] old imperatives, old movies. It all swirls together, clichés mixing with your own emotions, and in the end you can't tell one from the other (207). Tim mimics his movie heroes, entering into fictional roles

that become reality when he appropriates them and which distance him from the harsh realities of war. O'Brien's filmic imagery emphasizes the way in which the experiences of the soldier at war are already constructed, even as they are occurring for the first time, by being filtered through individual biases and preconceptions. "Heart-truth" is thus not only something that is pulled together, post-experience, but it is something the soldier is already creating as he experiences a situation for the first time.[5]

This "heart-truth" is solidified when Tim, acting as narrator, rather than playing with the author persona, discusses the way in which he reacts to stories as a listener, which also, perhaps, hints at how the reader should react to Tim's stories. In "The Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong," the improbable tale of an innocent Midwestern girl who comes to join her soldier fiancé in Vietnam, Tim points out the way in which Rat Kiley, when telling this and other stories, "wanted to heat up the truth, make it burn so hot that you would feel exactly what he felt" (89). When listening to Rat's stories, Tim tells us that "you'd find yourself performing rapid calculations in your head, subtracting superlatives, figuring the square root of an absolute and then multiplying by maybe" (90). Here, Tim uses oddly scientific language to describe the process of figuring the truth, which involves the seemingly objective process of "performing rapid calculations" involving "square roots" and "multiplying." We would normally think of such processes as having one and only one "right" answer. However, this objectivity is illusory, because the calculator, whether reader or Kiley's audience within the text, is unable to actually obtain such an answer. Tim's poetic description of Kiley's storytelling methods again highlights the flimsiness of any conception of absolute truth. "Truth," in fact, is

[5] As Tim imagines himself in the roles of all his old movie heroes, his use of "you" in this passage, along with the reader's own experiences with film, cause the reader to perform this same operation, imagining herself into *Tim's* role.

reversible, depending on the circumstances of viewing and experiencing, as well as the narrator's motives for telling. By examining Tim's own reaction to war stories, the text performatively produces a similar reaction within the reader.

Things also produces within the reader an experience like that of Jimmy Cross and Tim, in "Love," who talk about "all the things we still carried through our lives," as they sift through the "maybe a hundred old photographs" which are "spread out across the kitchen table" (27). As they do so, they are reminded of particular people and memories, but there is no set order to these reminiscences. It all depends on what photograph happens to come up next. This sense of sifting through photographs prefigures the way the reader encounters the text, with its snapshot-like sections, rearranging the pieces in her head in order to make sense of various narratives, as new information is presented. Ultimately, the text is what the reader makes of it. Each time Tim calls his own words into question, the reader, like Tim listening to Rat, performs calculations in her head and "multiplies by maybe."

Even if the reader cannot find the ultimate answer to this conundrum, he or she can get at one type of truth, the "heart truth" of Rat Kiley's experience. In fact, Catherine Calloway pinpoints this type of calculation and mental rearranging as one of the key literary features of Things. She points out that the "reader has to piece together information, such as the circumstances surrounding the characters' deaths, in the same manner that the characters must piece together the reality of the war, or, for that matter, Curt Lemon's body" (Parag. 15).[6] The reader performs a jigsaw-like reconstruction, unconsciously mimicking the actions of the soldiers within the text. Yet just as the

[6] Curt Lemon is a character in the text who is blown to pieces after stepping on a landmine, as related in "How to Tell a True War Story." Tim and another soldier must then "shinny up [into the tree where his body parts landed] and peel him off" (83).

soldiers cannot put Curt Lemon back together again, the reader cannot ever recreate the entire, "real" story behind the text. Instead, "remembering [Vietnam] is turned into a kind of rehappening" (32), in which the reader must become an active participant in the creation of the text's meaning and reconstruct the experience within herself. This sense of "rehappening" rather than fixed memory allows the experience to be relived and reconstructed, with a potentially different meaning, each time the text is read. Tim insists that his own dance with the truth is "not a game. It's a form" (179). In other words, this invention is not merely for the sake of invention – it has a higher purpose, of which the reader is also a part. Tim uses form as a way to convey to the reader the way in which "heart-truth" is constructed not only by the experiencer or storyteller, but also by the reader/listener.[7]

[7] The reader is also pulled into this "form," reading the text simultaneously as a story about trying to tell a story, and thus imagining herself into the role of the writer, the person trying to make sense of the experience, and also performing the soldier's role of confusion regarding truth and experience.

III. Circling

Another performative strategy O'Brien employs in The Things They Carried to indirectly represent "heart-truth" is Tim's use of repetition and circling. Tim posits in "How to Tell a True War Story" that "You can tell a true war story by the way it," like the edge of a circle, "never seems to end" (77). Tim tells and retells the same stories, returns to scenes from several different angles, and creates ghostly echoes of his own stories and characters. This repetition appears, for example, in the book's first story, "The Things They Carried," which, in between listing the soldiers' burdens, circles around the death of a soldier, "Ted Lavender, who was scared," and who "carried tranquilizers until he was shot in the head outside the village of Than Khe in mid-April" (2). The reader is never allowed to know Lavender without also knowing his death, because Tim plays with prolepsis, telling the reader that "until he was shot" Lavender did this or that (2), and "when he was shot and killed"(6) Lavender was carrying "an exceptional burden" (6). Each time Tim circles back to Lavender, he reveals a little more about the man and his death, though he doesn't relate the story of the actual moment until halfway through the section, when the reader learns that "Ted Lavender was shot in the head on his way back from peeing. He lay with his mouth open. The teeth were broken. Oh shit, Rat Kiley said, the guy's dead. The guy's dead, he kept saying, which seemed profound—the guy's dead, I mean really" (13).

After drifting away from Lavender and back into the burdens of the men, Tim once again returns to "After the chopper took Lavender away" (16), when Kiowa points out "how fast it was, no drama, down and dead" (18). The story again swings away, into

the things the men carried, then back to the men "waiting for Lavender's chopper, smoking the dead man's dope" (20). This pattern of repeated retreat and return emphasizes Lavender's death and turns it into the emotional center of the story. Yet the death is simultaneously the story's edge, the point beyond which it never goes. Tim plays with time, but does not reach beyond the moments surrounding Lavender's death. The story performs the way in which memory is created over time, as we return again and again to the original moment, and gradually integrate it into our conceptions of ourselves and our personal hierarchies of event importance. This circling repetition recreates the experience of the soldiers in Things, who constantly return to Lavender's death, as well as other deaths in the book, such as Kiowa's, in order to "ke[ep] the dead alive with stories" (239). Jimmy Cross, Tim tells us, will carry Lavender's death, "like a stone in his stomach for the rest of the war" (16), and the reader, similarly, will carry the story through the end of the book and beyond.[8] For the reader and the characters, Lavender's death, like the edge of a circle inscribed onto experience, "never seems to end."

This circling, which represents the process of creating memory and personal understanding, O'Brien's "heart-truth," also occurs in the story of Norman Bowker, which Tim retells four times in Things. The first time, in "Speaking of Courage," Bowker's tale is told by an apparently omniscient third-person narrator, who gets inside the veteran's head and relates the story of an afternoon spent driving in circles through a hometown that "could not talk, and would not listen" to his experiences as a soldier (143). As Bowker drives, he remembers the death of a comrade in Vietnam and what he perceives as his own complicity in that death, how "he had taken hold of Kiowa's boot

[8] In fact, the entire book ultimately circles back to Lavender, whose death is returned to one last time in the final section of Things, when the soldiers remember the man and "could almost see [his] dreamy blue eyes. [. . .] could almost hear him" (231).

and pulled hard, but how the smell was simply too much, and how he'd backed off and in that way had lost the Silver Star" and also Kiowa's life (153).

But this is not the end of Bowker's narrative. Like Bowker circling around the lake, searching for meaning, Tim himself returns to the story of Kiowa and Bowker in the shit field, in the next section, "Notes." Here," Tim steps back into the author's role, and presents a metanarrative describing the evolution of the previous story, which he claims was "written in 1975 at the suggestion of Norman Bowker" (155). Tim confesses that while he was writing the original version of the story, "almost immediately . . . there was a sense of failure. . . . A metaphoric unity was broken" (159). The story we have here, he tells us, "has been substantially revised, in some places by severe cutting, in other places by addition of new material" (160). In addition to circling back to Bowker's story, this also returns to the issue of truth. As Tim steps into the role the reader expects to be played by the "real" author, O'Brien, the reader again questions what is and is not true in the story and how this "truth" relates to the meaning we take from our reading of it. Tim is careful to tell the reader, "In the interests of truth, however, I want to make it clear that Norman Bowker was in no way responsible for what happened to Kiowa. [. . .] That part of the story is my own" (160-1). He complicates the relatively simple narrative flow of "Speaking of Courage," and its mythic plot of the soldier's return and subsequent isolation, by adding layers of truth and untruth that throw the reader into confusion. Tim's feeling of failure in his use of literary writing techniques produces, in the reader, a sense of the inadequacy of our literary reading methods. The unity of our understanding has been broken.

Tim, however, does not abandon the story, or his reader, at this point. Instead, he circles back to the story yet again, with another twist, in "In the Field." In this version, Bowker is just one of several soldiers "circling out from where they had found the rucksack," in search of Kiowa's body (167). Kiowa is again lost under the shit field, but here Lieutenant Jimmy Cross and a "young soldier" who was "not a man, really—a boy" (163), are the men who feel responsible for Kiowa's death. The young soldier is never named, but he is repeatedly described as being "off by himself at the center of the field" (163), and as the reader again circles back with Tim to the story we've already heard twice, the last sentence of the previous telling takes on new meaning. When the reader first reads "That part of the story is my own," at the end of "Notes," it seems to mean that the story is Tim's invention, as he has just been discussing the things he *has* invented in the story of Norman Bowker and Kiowa. However, in "In the Field," the reader comes to the sudden and stunning realization that by "my own," Tim means that he is actually, telling a story that he experienced as the protagonist. *Tim* is the young unnamed soldier "at the center of the field" of the story, and, in fact, the entire book. He first attributes his own experience to someone else, but, finally, he destroys the artifice and, in doing so, reveals something crucial about his own reality. At this moment, all the multiple truths, the layers and circling, come together to reveal a flash of something real, a "heart-truth" of the soldier's experience and the way in which he copes with it.

This sense is ultimately confirmed when Tim returns to the story one last time, in "Field Trip." In this version, set twenty years after the war, Tim returns to "the site of Kiowa's death, and . . . looked for signs of forgiveness or personal grace or whatever else the land might offer" (180). He places Kiowa's moccasins in the muck where the man

went down, as a tribute to his friend and also as an act of atonement and personal forgiveness. In this story, Tim admits that Kiowa was his best friend and that "In a way, maybe, I'd gone under with Kiowa, and now, after two decades, I'd finally worked my way out" (187) of the guilt he, and not Norman Bowker, feels over this death. The story of Kiowa's death has become Tim's own story, the emotional center of all of the circling around Bowker, and perhaps the heart (and "heart truth") of the text as well. When Tim follows his own advice to "just keep on telling" (85) his experiences, and the reader keeps on reading, each telling reveals, without undoing all the previous truths, a deeper, more central level of meaning. The reader must both circle with the soldiers, and stand at the middle of the text's field with Tim in order to gain understanding.

IV. Ghosts

In "The Ghost Soldiers," Tim points out that "We called the enemy ghosts [. . .]. The land was haunted [. . .]. Late at night, on guard, it seemed that all of Vietnam was alive and shimmering—odd shapes swaying in the paddies, boogiemen in sandals, spirits dancing in old pagodas. It was ghost country" (202). Yet, in Tim's narrative of his Vietnam experiences, not only the enemy is phantasmic. The circles O'Brien inscribes on The Things They Carried can also be read as allegories of haunting, through the ghostly return of what Tim calls "the Vietnam that kept me awake at night" (184), as well as events and characters the reader thought had been left behind. In the final story of Things, "The Lives of the Dead," Tim talks about the way in which "the dead sometimes smile and sit up and return to the world" through stories (225). Here, lost friends and lovers and even unnamed fellow soldiers perpetually haunt Tim, who keeps "dreaming Linda alive. And Ted Lavender, too, and Kiowa, and Curt Lemon, and a slim young man I killed, and several others whose bodies I once lifted and dumped into a truck" (225). These ghostly figures join together to form part of O'Brien's "heart-truth." And as they trouble Tim, the phantoms simultaneously haunt the reader, who experiences ghostly returns throughout the book.[9]

One way that O'Brien creates ghostly figures in The Things They Carried is through the photographs his characters carry with them. In the book's title story, the

[9]For example, the reader experiences, in this final story, the ghostly return of Kiowa, again alive and comforting Tim when he was "brand-new to the war" (226) and of "Ted Lavender [who] had a habit of popping four or five tranquilizers every morning" and who "in April . . . was shot in the head outside the village of Than Khe" (230). In fact, even the language of the first story, where Lavender was described as someone who "carried tranquilizers until he was shot in the head outside the village of Than Khe in mid-April" (2), reappears, the words only slightly rearranged in this final version.

narrator begins by talking about the letters and photographs "from a girl named Martha, a junior at Mount Sebastian College in New Jersey" that Jimmy Cross carries (1). In Vietnam, "Almost everyone humped photographs" and "Whenever [Jimmy Cross] looked at the photographs, he though of new things he should've done" with Martha (4-5). Though the action of the story is set in Vietnam, the photographs create a spiritual link to the non-war world, a place "where things came together but also separated," as also represented by the small pebble from the Jersey shore that Martha sends to Cross (8).

Martha, like so much of America, "never mentioned the war" (1), would rather pretend that it wasn't happening, yet she still crosses the line into the war world on a ghostly level. In fact, even when Jimmy Cross tries to distance the outside world from the war, by "holding [Martha's] photographs over the tight blue flame with the tips of his fingers" to burn them (23), he fails. The picture of Martha physically returns, in a ghostly resurrection, in the next story, "Love," twenty years after the war, along with "maybe a hundred old photographs," of the war, which represented, according to Tim, "all the things we still carried through our lives" (27). These photographic representations of someone carried into the war from outside show the reader that even those who are seemingly beyond the war are not really removed from it.[10] Their memory is constantly haunting the soldier, making all of America complicit in the soldier's experience.

The textual boundaries of Things also "never seem to end." Tim repeatedly references events, texts, and people that are external to the book, thus the story is also

[10] A similar photographic intrusion into war occurs in "In the Field," in which a young soldier shows his friend a picture of his girlfriend, then loses it in the dark muck of a shit field. The soldier panics, searching for the photograph, saying "My girl. What about her?" (172), as if the picture has become an actual person.

haunted from outside its own textual world. In "Notes," Tim, again taking a metanarrative stance, claims that "Speaking of Courage" was "written in 1975 at the suggestion of Norman Bowker" (155). He discusses the way in which "Bowker's letter had an effect. It haunted me for more than a month, not the words so much as its desperation [. . .]" (158). Tim himself explicitly uses the word "haunting" in reference to an event external to the text. He goes on to say that he "resolved finally to take him up on his story suggestion. At the time I was at work on a new novel, *Going After Cacciato*, and one morning I sat down and began a chapter titled 'Speaking of Courage'"(158). In another blurring of reality and literature, O'Brien's fictional alter-ego Tim has, like the "real" O'Brien, written a book called *Going After Cacciato*, and the reader is told that the story "Speaking of Courage" was originally part of that text. However, that version is not the "Speaking of Courage" we find in Things.[11] Here, "Although the old structure remains, the piece has been substantially revised, in some places by severe cutting, in other places by the addition of new material. Norman is back in the story, where he belongs, and I don't think he would mind that his real name appears" (160). The reader cannot tell for certain whether the "real name" of Norman Bowker is the name of a person outside of the text or whether, if he does exist, he actually had any of these experiences. Through these meta-textual acts, Tim once again multiplies the potential truths behind his story and indicates that whatever truth the author ultimately settles on, it always contains the ghosts of other possibilities. Heart truth is more inclusive, though not necessarily more stable, than any standard conception of objective truth.

[11] This is not the only section of Things that has appeared in multiple publications and versions. In a footnote to "How to Tell a True War Story": Metafiction in The Things They Carried," Catherine Calloway discusses additional crossovers of this sort.

O'Brien will not allow even the reader to remain extra-textual. In "How To Tell a True War Story," he pulls the reader into the text through Tim's use of the word "you." He says, "For the common soldier, at least, war has the feel—the spiritual texture—of a great ghostly fog, thick and permanent. There is no clarity. Everything swirls. . . . The vapors suck you in. You can't tell where you are, or why you're there, and the only certainty is overwhelming ambiguity" (82). Though the selection begins in the third person, Tim quickly switches to the second, placing the reader in the "you" position of the "common soldier." The reader is not on the outside, a "he" or "she" or "I," looking in, but is imagining himself as that discombobulated "you" in the text, imagining what he would do in the same situation. This sort of switch, and the resulting reader identification occurs throughout the text.

Finally, Tim is even haunted by earlier incarnations of himself, which share a simultaneous existence with his current self. He says that ". . . when I look at photographs of myself as I was in 1956, I realize that in the important ways I haven't changed at all. I was Timmy then; now I'm Tim. But the essence remains the same" (236). Despite external changes, Tim says that " . . . there is no doubt that the Timmy smiling at the camera is the Tim I am now. Inside the body, or beyond the body, there is something absolute and unchanging. The human life is all one thing, like a blade tracing loops on ice: a little kid, a twenty-three-year-old infantry sergeant, a middle-aged writer knowing guilt and sorrow (236). Here, again using the trope of circling, Tim emphasizes the continuity of human experience, which is so often lost in the individual trauma of the Vietnam soldier.

Just as Tim feels that ghosts of his earlier self live on within his heart and his "heart-truth," the reader feels this same sense about Things and Tim's representation of his war experiences. The experiences and the people in his stories never quite die. "We kept the dead alive with stories," Tim claims (239). The ghosts are forever returning. In fact, "To listen to the story, especially as Rat Kiley told it, you'd never know that Kurt Lemon was dead. He was still out there in the dark, naked and painted up, trick-or-treating, sliding from hootch to hootch in that crazy white ghost mask" (240). There is an odd simultaneity created by telling the war, a way in which people are living and at the same time, not. Tim himself describes it best, discussing a dream conversation with Linda, in which she says, "'Well, right now. . . I'm not dead. But when I am, it's like . . . I don't know, I guess it's like being inside a book that nobody's reading" (245). Whenever someone takes down her book and begins reading, she again becomes alive, just as the reader revives Tim's war experiences by entering into Things. The reader's encounter with this text thus becomes a ghostly rehappening, where the "heart-truth" of Tim's war experience is resurrected again and again.

V. Trauma

In The Things They Carried, Tim O'Brien presents a performative text which produces within the reader the confusion of the Vietnam veteran's traumatic experience. Through metanarrative, ghostly repetition, and circling, he demonstrates to the reader the slipperiness of truth and allows her to experience the constructed nature of narrative and of reality itself. In short, O'Brien succeeds at transmitting the affective "heart-truth" of a soldier's war encounters. Yet, in the same way that the Vietnam War is typically read as a mythic American experience, which is not fully representable, trauma is frequently read as something that cannot be transmitted to the reader through aesthetic representation. How, then, does O'Brien's successful transmission of trauma relate to the task and capabilities of trauma literature as a whole?

Many of the characters in Things struggle, like Norman Bowker, with "the problem of finding a meaningful use for [their] li[ves] after the war" (155). This, according to Kali Tal, is a common fight for the returned veteran. In "Speaking the Language of Pain," Tal suggests that the Vietnam soldier returns from war, but does not rejoin society fully, because "liminality was the condition of the soldier at the front . . . and that rather than passing into the post-liminal phase upon his return, the veteran continued to be a 'liminal type'" (Tal, 227). Post-war, soldiers like Norman Bowker cannot easily reintegrate into the non-military world, and thus end up stranded, according to Tal, in an indefinite state of in-between-ness, like all trauma survivors. In other words, the liminality of the traumatic situation, in which everything is in constant flux, shifts into a personal liminality when the soldier returns home. He somehow carries the features of

the war situation home with him, into society at large, which cannot even begin to understand his trauma.[12] According to Tal, this veteran's liminality causes an "unbridgeable gap between writer and reader" (218), in which the experience of trauma is forever locked inside the experiencer. A trauma survivor can write the experience, can "bear witness," but is forever stuck in a double bind between "the drive to testify and the impossibility of recreating the event" in the mind of the reader (Tal 231). The reader, in this figuring, cannot possibly understand what the experience was "really" like, thus stranding the writer/experiencer in a state of perpetual limbo, of which understanding from someone outside of the self and the experience is impossible.

O'Brien, however, does succeed at "recreating the event," his personal "heart-truth" of the Vietnam war in the mind of the reader. In doing so, he emphasizes the fact that exact recreation of an originary experience is not, in fact, what is important, contrary to Tal's assumptions. Absolute truth is an illusion and reality is always already a construction. What matters is that O'Brien performs the "heart-truth" of the soldier's trauma in the mind of his reader.[13] Dori Laub theorizes, in Testimony: Crises of

---

[12] Though trauma is intransmissible to most of the world, there are, according to Tal, certain people who *can* understand it: those who have also been through a traumatic experience. Tal claims that "the symbols generated by liminality are readable only to those familiar with the alphabet of trauma; what they represent is not common knowledge" (227). The traumatic experience somehow instills within the survivor a special capacity to decode the traumatic experiences of others. Yet Tal never specifies what makes, for example, a Holocaust survivor, more equipped than anyone else to understand the completely unique experience of a Vietnam War veteran. Furthermore, what is the use in writing trauma stories at all if, as Tal claims, only a small portion of the population can potentially understand their "alphabet"?

[13] Furthermore, this bridging is able to occur because of O'Brien's use of literary techniques, contradicting Tal's idea that "For combat veterans [. . .] *Re*telling the war in a memoir or describing it in a novel involves not merely the development of alternative national myths through the manipulation of plot and literary techniques, but also the necessary rebuilding of shattered personal myths"(226). Tal positions this type of writing against that of non-veterans, which she claims "are products of the authors' urge to tell a story, make a point, create an aesthetic experience, or move people in a particular way. Nonveteran literature is, in short, the product of a literary decision" (226). By putting these two types of writing in direct opposition to one another, Tal places veterans' literature into a category in which it must be read as a brand of personal medicine, a way to heal the soul and the psyche of the writer, and not as a text which uses literary methods to attain aesthetic goals. Yet O'Brien clearly indicates that, while this text shares

Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History that "Massive trauma precludes its registration; the observing and recording mechanisms of the human mind are temporarily knocked out [. . .] the trauma—as a known event and not simply as an overwhelming shock—has not been truly witnessed yet, has not been taken cognizance of" (57). When the experiencer, such as a soldier, first emerges from trauma, he or she has no meaningful conception of the experience, and is, like Tal's soldier, stranded in a liminal state. In Laub's figuring, however, the trauma survivor can emerge from this liminality by transmitting his experience to someone else. Laub continues on to say understanding trauma is a collaborative event, in which, "[. . .] the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself" (Laub 57). By creating a performative text, as shown above, O'Brien enacts exactly this collaboration between reader and trauma experiencer and thus transmits the experience to the reader in a meaningful way, which solidifies his own understanding of his experience, as "Tim trying to save Timmy's life with a story" (231).

Tim claims that a "true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior, nor restrain men from doing the things men have always done" (68). However, we typically think of war stories as somehow instructing us in what it takes to be brave under fire, to endure. This is, in fact, what we think of most trauma literature, that it somehow teaches the reader what

---

commonalities with his "real" life, he "objectifies his own experiences" in order to have the distance required to manipulate events and use the tools available to him as a literary author, rather than just a trauma survivor. He also emphasizes this literary craftsmanship in "Notes," in which he explores his literary methodology, and talks about techniques he has used such as "a dramatic frame," "A metaphoric unity," and "transplanting" the story to a new location (158-9), in order to tell one particular story based on his life.

human beings are capable of under the most adverse conditions. Despite his original assertion to the contrary, Tim ultimately concedes that sometimes we *can* learn from the war story, but it's never an easy lesson. He says, "In a true war story, if there's a moral at all, it's like the thread that makes the cloth. You can't tease it out" (77). In Tim's figuring, "a true war story is never about war. It's about sunlight. It's about the special way that dawn spreads out on a river when you know you must cross the river and march into the mountains and do things you are afraid to do. It's about love and memory" (85). In other words, the individual material experience of the world is what is at the heart of truth, not an all-encompassing "reality."

In trauma theory, and in life, perhaps we are so insistent that we can't represent experience "truly" because we want to privilege our own experiences, in order to give them greater value. O'Brien, however, allows us both to see that truth is in the details, but simultaneously to understand that reality is, on some levels, just another type of fictional representation, which is always filtered and rearranged and put back together through one individual. In fact, we are all always in transition, like the soldier, and experience our own versions of trauma and liminality. It is this commonality that Kali Tal fails to recognize and on which Tim O'Brien builds his text. As Tim says, "Stories are for joining the past to the future" (38). In other words, stories are what link us, fundamentally, sharing our personal pasts with the readers, friends, listeners, learners of the future.

WORKS CITED

Calloway, Catherine. "How to Tell a True War Story": Metafiction in The Things They Carried." Critique. Washington: 36.4 (1995) 249-258. Viewed through Proquest on-line database.

Carpenter, Lucas. "'It Don't Mean Nothin'': Vietnam War Fiction and Postmodernism." College Literature 30.2 (2003) 30-50.

Felman, Shoshana and Dori Laub M.D. Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History. New York: Routledge, 1992.

Herzog, Tobey C. Vietnam War Stories: Innocence Lost. New York: Routledge, 1992.

O'Brien, Tim. The Things They Carried. New York: Broadway, 1998.

Tal, Kali. "Speaking the Language of Pain: Vietnam War Literature in the Context of a Literature of Trauma." Fourteen Landing Zones: Approaches to Vietnam War Literature. Ed. Philip K. Jason. Iowa City: U of Iowa Press, 1991. 217-50.

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES
3 1293 02504 4326