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“The Ugly Truth”: Examining War Trauma and Therapeutic Storytelling through the Works of Tim O’Brien

Meredith Fedewa

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

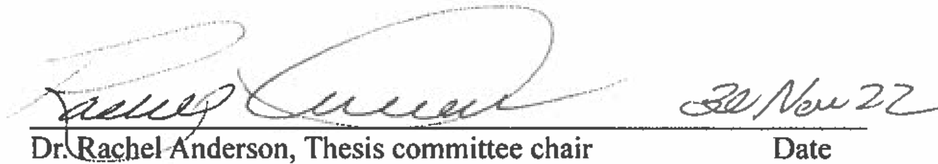
Master of Arts in English

Department of English

December 2022

Thesis Approval Form

The signatories of the committee members below indicate that they have read and approved the thesis of Meredith Fedewa in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English.



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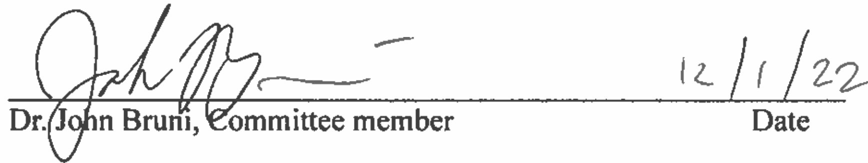

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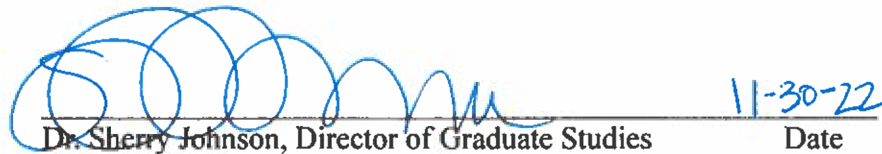

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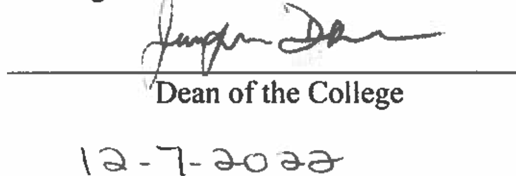

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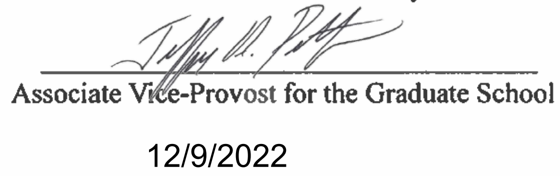

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INTRODUCTION

THE MODIFIED TRIANGLE

Trauma and literature have an intimate history. In specifically looking at the connection between trauma theory, psychoanalytic theory, and writing, the investigation of personality is often rooted in conversation and storytelling. Each discipline is intrigued with "the complex relation between knowing and not knowing" and more precisely, it is the "specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language of literature and the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet" (Caruth 3). Within both verbal and written storytelling, victims of traumatic experience are encouraged to try and understand the ambiguous nature of their traumatic encounter in a way that allows them to take ownership of the trauma and begin the process of healing. As trauma is often cited to be indescribable, omnipresent, and recurring, writing creates a space to attempt naming the unnamable while also navigating personal identity within a newfound, shattered self.

When looking more closely at trauma itself, the experience of personal crisis can be extremely diverse, but each traumatic encounter focuses on the tri-part "problem of listening, of knowing, and of representing" (Caruth 5). Bryan Doerries investigates such relationships and demonstrates how traumatic experiences can connect the modern day with that of ancient Greece. While psychoanalytic theory, trauma, and talking have a longstanding interrelationship, Doerries demonstrates that an individual's response to trauma can also manifest within performed stories. Doerries created his group, Theater of War Productions, in order to perform ancient Greek tragedies in front of a modern day audience; for example, performing *Ajax*, in front of a U.S. Army installation. In doing so, he creates connections between the audience and

the tale as a way to process traumatic experiences. Doerries notes that in response to people listening to Greek tragedy, "audiences all over the world respond…it's that people who have come into contact with death, who have faced the darkest aspects of our humanity, who have loved and lost, and who know the meaning of sacrifice…These tragedies are their stories" (Doerries 7). Through placing Greek tragedy in the hands of modern audiences, this author connects the power of storytelling to traumatic processing. This paves the way for tragedy and storytelling to become "a powerful tool for positive change" that can help "propagat[e] healthy responses to stress" (Doerries 38).

In applying these concepts of tragedy, storytelling, and the power of processing trauma, literature offers another space where veterans are free to represent and dissect their own trauma through personal and creative means. More particularly, the fragmented, chaotic nature of the Vietnam War period often led veterans and soldiers to try and process their feelings of pain and societal rejection through the act of writing. For soldiers, "narrative rendition is an integral component of war" because it acts not only as a sense of bond-building or camaraderie, but it also creates an "exposition of a special kind of violence" that creates a circular sharing of traumatic encounters on listeners (Wesley 1-2). This circular sharing then creates another wheel of support in regards to navigating mental strain and PTSD; as survivors of warfare are able to use writing in order to try and relay their experiences to others, they also are able to find those within society that choose to listen and act upon the raw imagery placed before them.

Within the lens of storytelling, however, also comes social expectation. Some of the "traditional" tropes of veterans and those that serve their country focus on violence as something that becomes inherently "masculine," where fighting and defending the United States becomes a wartime landscape where "'winners' are 'determined,'" and images of "America the White

Knight, [and] America the Lone Ranger" rise to prominence (Wesley 3; O'Brien "The Vietnam"). In addition, civilians often believe such an image, for they "idealize or disparage…military service while avoiding detailed knowledge of what that service entailed" and as a result, sharing stories or telling war stories is rarely supported, and if it is, it usually is "segregated among combat veterans" (Herman 67). This digression of experience creates a "fixation on the trauma" which also further segregates "warriors from the rest of society" (Herman 67).

As a result of this separation between veteran storytellers and listeners, soldiers often shift towards the medium of literature and writing as a way to help translate their thoughts onto a page. Writers are able to use a variety of techniques and provide "models of syntactic and semantic possibilities" that allow for the sharing of stories in a multitude of ways (Scholes 116). By combining the field of literature with veteran storytelling, veterans and survivors of wartime trauma are able to reshape their stories for a broader and willing audience, which results in a form of encouragement for participants to "unveil the unsaid" or uncover what is "between the lines" (Kowalczuk 1). Vietnam veteran and author Tim O'Brien is one such example of a writer who combines the infinite possibilities of writing with their own wartime experience. O'Brien utilizes techniques such as fragmentation, and blends storylines in a way that immerse the reader within the landscape of Vietnam without appeasing the supposed soldier trope. Because these storylines are focused on gritty, harsh, and beautiful moments in Vietnam that act as a tie between real-life and imagined experiences, O'Brien shifts the audience away from preconceived images of warfare in order to introduce a character version of himself that represents memory reimagined. This author holds a notable career both in Vietnam and as a writer, but it is the unique way that O'Brien uses narrative as a form of malleable thread between audience and text

that demonstrates the true power of storytelling, and through the lens of psychoanalysis and trauma theory, the power of healing. As a result, O'Brien intertwines and represents the powerful nature of healing through processing traumatic memory — all within the "action" of narrative (Phelan 2).

Through the application of trauma theory to the works of Tim O'Brien, specifically *The Things they Carried*, *Going After Cacciato*, and *In the Lake of the Woods*, readers connect and modify the traditional rhetorical triangle of author-text-reader to one of trauma-storytelling-healing. By shifting a reader's interaction with the text to one that is grounded within the latter triangular relationship, the audience of the text, and thus witness to the story, gains insight into the complex process of coping with trauma, as well as how literature offers a powerful opportunity to negotiate healing through memory.

Within this thesis, the negotiations between trauma, healing, and literature are first introduced within Chapter One. This first chapter walks through two important components that help build understanding for both the theory and literary history that shape the analysis of O'Brien's texts. First, a brief history of psychoanalytic theory, and more specifically trauma theory is presented; this timeline begins with Freud and ends with more modern day theorists such as Ann E. Kaplan. Additionally, this chapter provides a brief history of the literary trends in the genre of war literature, starting with World War One and ending with the war in Vietnam. This collective framework helps provide a clear picture regarding both the theory being used to analyze the chosen O'Brien texts, as well as why and how the trends being studied in the texts help open up a wider conversation regarding trauma and healing.

The trends introduced in Chapter One then augment in Chapter Two, for this section introduces O'Brien's concept of Story Truth and Happening Truth as seen in the author's 1990

text *The Things They Carried*. In this chapter, a closer investigation into how O'Brien defines and balances Story Truth and Happening Truth occurs in addition to how those concepts operate in a text that exists out of a balance of fact and fiction. Applying this theory, the chapter then shifts to analyze the balance of fact and fiction in relation to the literary techniques of fragmentation and imagination. Here, O'Brien's 1978 text *Going After Cacciato* is introduced in order to examine how characters such as Paul Berlin simultaneously use imagination (Story Truth) in order to break from and redesign one's reality (Happening Truth). In culmination, this chapter demonstrates the omnipresence of Story Truth and Happening Truth, illustrates how those concepts thread throughout all of O'Brien's works, and presents how those particular writing techniques turn into representative coping mechanisms for soldiers that are navigating trauma.

Next, Chapter Three switches the focus from soldiers using imagination and storytelling to help understand their trauma, to the role of the outside listener. This section introduces the concept of the sympathetic listener, or someone who chooses to witness a victim's traumatic tale. In addition to outlining the theoretical dynamics of what being a listener entails, this chapter highlights the power listening provides for a storytelling victim, as well as how reading differs from the act of listening. In application to literature, this section of the thesis analyzes successful and unsuccessful instances of listening within O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*; more specifically, the analysis illustrates the dangers of what can happen when a soldier's story falls on an unwilling listener, as well as the benefit that can arise from those that do choose to engage with a victim's story.

In Chapter Four, the final chapter of this investigation, the role of society and how society plays into listening and soldier trauma is examined. This chapter begins with presenting how a

society or community views a member that goes to war, as well as how that traditionally patriotic image is then reversed when a soldier comes home. At this point, the third and final O'Brien text of this study is introduced: the 1994 piece *In the Lake of the Woods*. In order to help depict the soldier image binary and how it is related to group trauma and listening, key components of the protagonist John Wade's journey are studied, especially how a soldier's wartime experience is seen as a negative within the public eye. The rest of this section focuses on how Wade attempts to reject his own personal traumatic history in favor of attempted erasure, as well as the impossibility of doing so. Finally, this chapter ends with recognizing the power in telling and listening to stories within communities, as well as how one's experience of trauma forces a reshaping of one's individual identity.

Each of the above aforementioned texts by Tim O'Brien present the balance between soldier trauma, social expectations, and attempted healing. By looking closely at how trauma is represented within these three texts, depictions of successful and unsuccessful instances of trauma sharing and witnessing come to light through the variety of characters, writing techniques, story structure, and settings implemented by O'Brien. Ultimately, it is through this investigation that audiences will be able to see not only the complex dissection of a soldier's navigation of traumatic wartime experiences, but also how, through the lens of trauma theory and psychoanalytic theory, the power of storytelling can initiate the process for progress and help a victim take those next steps towards recovery.

CHAPTER 1

THE HISTORY AND EVOLUTION OF TRAUMA THEORY

Psychoanalytic theory, and more specifically the branch of trauma theory, has a rich history that spans across disciplines. While initially focused within the realm of women and hysteria, the field of trauma studies grew throughout modern and into contemporary times in order to examine the role trauma plays within varying contexts such as war and terrorism. In addition to growing contexts, the examination of trauma on distinct populations also expanded; instead of solely viewing trauma within infantry soldiers, soon, the effects of trauma were studied on groups ranging from the victims themselves, to spouses, to whole populations[1].

The relationship between recurring pain and the human mind first gained recognition through the works of Sigmund Freud. One of the first scientists to explore the idea of trauma, Freud initially examined the concept of women and hysteria in relation to soldiers on active duty. During World War One, Freud examined symptoms of soldiers that were removed from the front lines due to the experience of bodily trauma. In seeing the effects of recurring nightmares and paranoia, Freud soon translated his diagnosis of female hysteria into male shell shock, reflective of each soldier's shocking and traumatic experience during warfare.

The crux of Freud's findings fell outside of the physical body despite initially delving into the relationship of trauma and the individual through hysteria and shell shock. Essentially, Freud discovered the unique existence of trauma not in the physical "wound inflicted…upon the body but upon the mind" (Caruth 3). This wound upon the mind then grew into what would be

---

[1] Trauma studies, including symptoms and victim demographics, is vast. While the forthcoming list of trauma theorists and some of their more notable theoretical principles are highlighted within this study, the history provided here is not all-inclusive. The selected trauma history presented here focuses within the realm of infantry soldiers and thus offers a slightly smaller scope with which to study representations of war in modern literature.

classified as a form of "double wound," for while the physical trauma upon the body is immediately felt, a wound upon the mind escapes consciousness initially due to the unexpected and overwhelming nature of the trauma itself (Ofra 623). The victim's experience or memory of trauma then augments "repetitive actions and nightmares," for while the victim attempts to house these traumatic memories within a "repressed" state of consciousness, the wounded mind never forgets (Ofra 623, Žižek 120). This is reiterated through Cathy Caruth's text, *Unclaimed Experience*, where she emphasizes that Freud's belief of the repetition of "catastrophic events" ties not to the individual, but through the belief that these episodes appear "as the possession of some people by a sort of fate…which seem to be entirely outside of their wish or control" and results in an "unwitting reenactment of an event that one cannot simply leave behind" (1, 2). That reenactment ultimately illustrates Freud's belief that trauma "defines the shape of individual lives" (Caruth 61).

Freud initially created his theoretical relationship between trauma and victim through his concept of hysteria and shell shock, but within the modern context, some of Freud's principles closely connect to contemporary research done by theorists. Freud's theory "posits that trauma imprints on the body an immediate reality beyond and prior to linguistic distortion," which reiterates that giving a voice to trauma via language has the potential to be dangerous (Janowitz 213). As Freud initially reported the capability for traumatic memories to be cyclical, the potential to relive the traumatic experience in relation to language has the ability to further emphasize the trauma and inhibit meaning; on the contrary, reliving those experiences within a more modern lens also allows for the ability to view the past within "new meaning" (Janowitz 215). In viewing this traumatic past within the cyclical present, Freud sets the foundation for

trauma studies through presenting that the individual psyche offers a much more complicated view of an individual's relationship to trauma than initially suggested.

Following Freud, Jacques Lacan, a French psychoanalyst, further built upon Freud's concepts of trauma in order to examine how trauma functions within his own tri-part psychoanalytic theory. Lacan's theory operates within a triangular framework where his stages, the Imaginary Order, the Symbolic Order, and the Real, all interrelate and operate out of the main theoretical goal: achieving desire through self-fulfillment in becoming whole.

The first stage, the Imaginary Order, occurs when one is an infant. In this stage, the infant achieves a sense of wholeness or oneness due to their relationship with their mother in the physical world. Because the child does not yet have language, they rely on their mother's ability to interpret their needs and desires in order to maintain a sense of fulfillment (Johnson). Essentially, due to the mother being able to fulfill the needs of the child without words, the child believes that they themselves are the center of, and one with, the world around them. This concept of oneness then becomes complicated as the infant encounters the Mirror Stage during their time in the Imaginary Order.

As the infant is one with the world and their mother, they experience a unique encounter in their own recognition of bodily fragmentation. Between six months and eighteen months old, the child is able to recognize themselves for the first time when glancing at a mirror (Lacan, *Écrits* 76). In seeing themselves reflected in the mirror, the infant views their fragmented body within a reflection that depicts themselves as whole and unified; this results in the infant thus viewing themselves as an object while existing as a subject. The viewed image of themselves in a mirror then "anticipates the mastery of the infant's own body and stands in contrast to the feelings of fragmentation the infant experiences" (Homer 25). In addition to this experience of

self-fragmentation and wholeness, Lacan states that the ego emerges. The ego is “formed by and takes its form from the organizing and constituting properties of the image” which equates to the birth of an imaginary function (Homer 25). This existence of the ego and understanding of fragmentation and unification then coincide together as the child grows and encounters the Symbolic Order.

Within the Symbolic Order, the child experiences their first traumatic fragmentation of self through acquiring language. Lacan notes that once the child learns components of language such as singular words, their innate bond with their mother shatters and creates a gap of “lack,” for while the pair once had the ability to communicate through unspoken desire, the ability to insert words then removes one’s fundamental connection to the mother and places the child in a closer relationship with their father (Johnson). Because the child loses that initial sense of oneness, they are left with a sense of lack that they are forever seeking to fulfill. Psychoanalysis emphasizes the concept of identity, so “the subject [thus] attempts to fill out its constitutive lack by means of identification” which coincides with “some master-signifier guaranteeing its place in the symbolic network” (Žižek 163). That lack and search for identity becomes Lacan’s concept of the objet petit á, one’s ultimate object of desire (Lacan, *Écrits* 462-63). Acquiring this object of desire becomes an individual’s life goal. If one is able to fulfill this lack through acquiring their objet petit á, then theoretically, they are able to reach a blissful state of jouissance through encountering Lacan's third stage of psychoanalysis: The Real.

The Real is a state of “the unknown that exists at the limit of this socio-symbolic universe and is in constant tension with it; however, the real is also a very paradoxical concept; it supports our social reality…but it also undermines that reality” (Homer 77). This state exists as an amorphous embodiment of fulfillment and potential, or the “unspeakable limit of human

existence" (Homer 94). As a result of this ambiguous nature of the real, whatever exists within the realm of the "unnamed" equates to the Real, which when building upon the psychoanalytic concepts of Freud, includes the experience of trauma. Essentially, "The Real can never be known but it can be felt as part of a traumatic encounter" (Janowitz 218). The pairing of trauma and the Real also ties back to Lacan's belief of fulfilling one's objet petit á and reaching the state of jouissance, for while bliss is the goal of human existence, it is born out of the Real and can only be experienced through the combination of pleasure and pain.

Looking closer at Lacan's view of trauma, the impact of sudden terror plays a prominant role within the realm of psychoanalysis. According to Slavoj Žižek, the "image of everyday reality offered by psychoanalysis [is] a fragile equilibrium that can be destroyed at any moment if, in a quite contingent and unpredictable way, trauma erupts" (17). According to Lacan, psychic trauma can result from the "confrontation" between the external world and one's ability to respond, understand, and "master these excitations" (Homer 83). These unpredictable moments of confrontation can also result in a cyclical experience of the memory, similar to Freud's research. Within Lacan's belief, the trauma arrests "symbolization" and then places the individual in an "earlier phase of development," which can produce a fixated memory; this memory then creates "intense mental disturbance and suffering…no matter how [one] tr[ies] to rationalize and express the memory" (Homer 84). This augments Freud's theory of cyclical memory, for not only does the repetitive experience of traumatic memory occur to the subject, but it also remains "unsymbolizable and is a permanent dislocation at the very heart of the subject," which highlights how the Real cannot be connected to Reality or fully encapsulate the traumatic experience through symbols and language due to there always being "something left over" (Homer 84).

Caruth, a Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Cornell, breaks away from the field of psychoanalysis to examine the human relationship to trauma through more medical means. Her text, *Unclaimed Experience*, highlights the work of prior psychoanalysts and their study of trauma and the mind, while also illustrating her own examination of how different types of trauma affect a variety of literary and theoretical populations. A few examples of such populations being examined include Freud, Kant, Lacan, and literature as a broader genre. After delving into the expansive representations and repercussions of trauma on individuals, she then uses the second half of the text to illustrate ways for victims, with professional support, to navigate confronting their trauma and start the process of healing.

Caruth begins her text by breaking open the prior understanding of trauma to highlight Lacanian-esque concepts of trauma and recovery through posing the question of whether one's experience of trauma is "the encounter with death or the ongoing experience of having survived it?" (7). In surviving an encounter with trauma, Caruth highlights the importance of not only "listening to another's wound" but also that accessing one's traumatic history may not necessarily be possible from the outset; essentially, one's traumatic history is only understood through "the very inaccessibility of its occurrence" (8, 19). As a result, Caruth illustrates that the ability to break into the psychological impact of such traumatic events must be born through examining interactions outside of one's personal scope. History should instead be examined through the way people interact with "each other's traumas" (Caruth 25).

Following this approach of studying the ways that trauma connects individuals together, Caruth dives into the impact of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) on trauma survivors. She describes PTSD as:

> the direct imposition on the mind of the unavoidable reality of horrific events, the taking over of the mind, psychically and neurobiologically, by an event that it cannot control…PTSD seems to provide the most direct link between the psyche and external violence [to be] the most destructive psychic disorder (59).

This destructive disorder connects back to Freud's initial findings within the study of soldiers in combat. While Freud described these psychological phenomena with his diagnosis of shell shock, Caruth's modern-day application of PTSD illustrates similar concepts of a mind falling victim to repetitive traumatic episodes via the cyclical nature of traumatic memory. This highlights the concept of trauma operating as a "shock" which "breaks the mind's experience of time, and ultimately reshapes a victim's experience of trauma as one that not only destroys, but offers an example of survival and "testimony to the impossibility of living" (Caruth 63, 60, 64).

Caruth reiterates the complex balance between trauma and existence through positing that traumatic disorder is "indeed the apparent struggle to die" (65). Through being unable to fully frame the experience of individual trauma due to the aforementioned nature of it being all-encompassing and existing before language, trauma itself therefore cannot exist within the "boundaries of an individual life" — similar to Lacan's concept of trauma existing within the realm of the Real (Caruth 121). Despite trauma existing absent of physical or biological boundaries, Caruth closes her text by reiterating the importance of attempting to engage with this trauma despite it being difficult to encapsulate within the boundaries of language. She notes that the experience of trauma initiates "*a command to respond"* (author's emphasis) to the individual and directly engages with the impact of trauma on one's history as it "oscil[ates] between death and survival" (Caruth 132). Caruth's approach to engaging with trauma ultimately expands

outside of the psychological sphere and translates to literature as one that allows for an "inassimilable shock" and thus "*induces trauma in its readers*" (author's emphasis, Forter 262).

Ann Kaplan in her text *Trauma Culture* follows a similar track as Caruth through examining the impact of not only the indescribable nature of trauma on individuals, but also how those traumas play into an individual or group's cultural background and surrounding political climate. Kaplan focuses on how the political and ideological context that surrounds an individual "shapes their impact" as well as how that context creates a difficulty in "separat[ing] individual and collective trauma" (1). Kaplan states that people can encounter a trauma through being a bystander, hearing about a trauma from a friend, or through "living near to where a catastrophe happened" (2). These forms of traumatic encounters become blurred through Kaplan's note of how culture can intervene within the event. Similar to the blurred boundaries of how trauma can be defined, the limits between individual and cultural trauma can also seem extremely difficult to define (2). This then connects back to the foundational exploration of trauma and PTSD through the military. Not only does military trauma create damage to one's sense of perception and representation, but the structure of The United States and its approach to military defense, according to Kaplan, create a variety of theories about nation and self that force the active duty member to further "descen[d] into the abyss of the 'Real'" (5, 16). Kaplan connects Lacan's sense of the Real to Freud's notes on combat neuroses in order to explain that despite the ambiguity of how trauma can be defined, individuals still encounter trauma differently. More explicitly, how soldiers react to traumas that are similar all depends on "how far the war situation triggered prior psychic conflicts" (Kaplan 32). These ideas then all collectively point to one of Kaplan's main suggestions for healing: listening.

Due to the vast nature of trauma and individual reactions to trauma, Kaplan suggests that there needs to be a way for an individual to navigate their experience. One way to do so is through the simple act of having someone listen. Through having a bystander listen to the traumatic encounter with empathy, Kaplan suggests that it is possible to have the victim understand the scope of how they exist within the realm of the trauma as well as their own individual and cultural identity. Essentially, through telling a story about the traumatic experience, one "may partly achieve a certain 'working trough' for the victim…[and] it may also…permit a kind of empathetic 'sharing'" that moves the collective speaker and listener pairing gradually forward (Kaplan 37).

Overall, Kaplan expands the realm of trauma studies through presenting the necessity of including cultural context within trauma research. As that context is able to provide a "framework for understanding traumatic events" and "opportunity for healing," when focused through the scope of trauma, Kaplan points to the possibility for differences and "cross-cultural dialogue" to further expand the comprehension of how trauma and the individual work together. In doing so, dialogue allows for empathy and listening to pave the way for helping others recognize public "atrocities" that can affect not solely individuals, but also surrounding bystanders (122).

To finalize this short timeline of prominent trauma theorists and ideologies, the last theorist that helped expand the understanding of trauma and individuals is Judith Herman. Similar to Caruth, this author examined the history of trauma theory and established a medical recommendation: a tri-part recovery program for trauma victims. Herman believes that the "central dialectic of psychological trauma" falls between the binary of one's ability to express the existence of the event and the will to reject the events themselves (1). In recognizing the

existence of these psychological traumas, Herman notes that recovery begins with the recognition of the trauma, and that the fundamental stages of recovery include "establishing safety, reconstructing the trauma story, and restoring the connection between survivors and their community" (1, 3). In following these steps, it is then possible that symptoms of PTSD and cyclical traumatic memories can start to lessen, and that the emotive experience from those aforementioned traumas can then be established within the boundaries of language (Herman 12).

Herman further dissects symptoms of PTSD through establishing three main categories: hyperarousal, intrusion, and constriction (35). These symptoms can modify one's approach to not only their individual identity, but also that of the world surrounding them. Herman explains that this complicated psychological interaction can manifest through feelings such as questioning the "safety of the world, the positive value of the self, and the meaningful order of creation" (51). Similar to the findings of Kaplan and Caruth, Herman notes that the severity of these symptoms ultimately results from the severity of the trauma and its impact on the individual. This includes "the number of people affected or the intensity and duration of harm" (Herman 57).

To conclude, Herman expands the understanding of trauma and healing through posing their own diagnostic criteria for a new form of PTSD, as well as a tri-part recovery process. Through collectively combining past trauma research with her own findings, Herman proposes that "prolonged, repeated trauma needs its own name" and that it should be called "complex post-traumatic stress disorder" because of the unique recurring nature of traumatic and memory-based episodes (Herman 119). This diagnosis also allows for a broader spectrum of symptoms and conditions instead of a single label, for as Herman notes, PTSD can manifest itself in a variety of fashions, just as each individual interacts with traumatic events differently. Closing her text, Herman states that this spectrum-based PTSD diagnosis requires a recovery

process that has three stages. The first stage requires the establishment of safety, the second focuses on remembrance and mourning, and the third emphasizes reconnecting with an ordinary life (Herman 155). By having the victim work through each stage of recovery, Herman illustrates the potential for the survivor to navigate their trauma and that the healing process can be adapted to each victim's needs. Herman thus presents a new potential wave of trauma studies that results from expanding the understanding of trauma and pain to not only include other populations, but also how a victim's encounter with trauma can be diverse.

The aforementioned theorists helped expand the understanding of trauma and populations through examining the effects of trauma on the psyche as well as how the experience of trauma is born from multiple causes. As a result of this recognition of the diversity of trauma, the field of literature became a respite for those not only seeking to explore the dynamics of trauma and the individual, but also as a place where a victim can initiate the healing process through written word. Through examining a timeline of the depiction of trauma and traumatic events within writing, critics of the discipline recognize that there is a certain "power of texts that seek less to *represent* traumatic events…than to transmit *directly* to the reader the experience of traumatic disruption" (Forter 260, author's emphasis). The audience of these texts are then forced to alter their own reading experience through modifying their perception of character and plot; instead of navigating sole representations of trauma via the characters within a tale, audiences are forced to confront their own experience. This style of writing then follows a "more general contemporary interest" within the field of writing where the language itself "performs or enacts what it has to say" (Forter 260).

Looking more closely at the field of literature and trauma, one of the paramount genres that illustrates traumatic experience is War Literature. Soldiers are often at the core of these texts,

where they are depicted either on the frontlines of combat or as adjusting to civilian life while wrestling with symptoms of PTSD. This "recurring image of trauma" shifts to depict the soldier as one "faced with sudden and massive death around him…who suffers this sight in a numbed state, only to relive it later on in repeated nightmares" (Caruth 12). Coupled with the image of all-encompassing death and cyclical traumatic memory, soldiers are often depicted as fighting individual moral alignment with national honor and duty, which creates a pressure that results in soldiers "break[ing] down in shocking numbers" due to the "unremitting exposure" of warfare (Herman 20).

Because of the varied depictions of soldier and wartime trauma, a brief timeline of prominent war literature follows in order to help present the escalation of soldier experience up to Vietnam and the works of Tim O'Brien. The first phase of this modern War Literature timeline most closely mirrors literary characteristics as seen within the Vietnam period; it is comprised of World War I, and more particularly, WWI British poets[2]. Within the period of trench warfare, two prominent poets that examined their experience of trauma within poetry were Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen. First, Sassoon is often associated with his poetry that illustrated anger towards WWI, especially towards the political handling of the war (Poetry Foundation). Sassoon often wrote about the "horror and brutality of warfare" as well as "satirized generals, politicians, and churchmen for…their blind support of the war" (Poetry Foundation). The poet's commentary on warfare soon led him to publicly announce his alignment with the "pacifist movement and denoun[ce] the war," despite still being an active duty service member (Herman 21).

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[2] While I am beginning my timeline of Modern War Literature at WWI British Poets, I recognize that the concepts of and relationship between trauma, war, and writing existed well before this particular period. Similarly, the forthcoming timeline is representative of only a small sample of authors, poets, and writers that chose to examine a soldier's experience of traumatic events. The following works and authors act as a brief representational sampling of how trauma and writing were being approached at that particular time.

Not long after Sassoon's proclamation of pacifism, Robert Graves, another prominent poet, pushed for Sassoon to receive care at Craiglockhart War Hospital, for due to his wartime experiences, he became "restless, irritable, and tormented by nightmares," leading to a full "psychological collapse" (Herman 22). The collapse experienced by Sassoon was soon after diagnosed as "combat neurosis," or in other words, PTSD, but the diagnosis itself did not slow down his poetic career; instead, he "devoted himself to writing and rewriting his war memoirs" in order to preserve his "memory of the fallen" and reiterate his alignment with pacifism (Herman 23). Sassoon's call for pacifism within poetry also opened up another view of wartime perception that differed from the one being promoted via politicians and public leaders. By highlighting the prominence of the antiwar movement, Sassoon helped make it possible to "recognize psychological trauma as a lasting and inevitable legacy of war" (Herman 27).

Wilfred Owen is another WWI British poet that helped present the prominence between trauma and poetry. Similar to Sassoon, Owen fought on the front lines of the war and translated his combat experiences to poetry; one difference, however, is that Owen composed all of his poems between August 1917 and September 1918 and was often featured within journals such as *Nation*, *Hydra*, and *Wheels* (Poetry Foundation). This poet often wrote "vivid and terrifying poems about modern warfare" in an effort to help depict "honest" emotions, for Owen chose to "keep their symptoms" of traumatic memory in order to help relay the dangers of warfare and the resulting psychological chaos (Herman 184).

While Owen was in active combat, he suffered severe headaches and a suspected concussion from a nearby shell blast that led him to visit a series of hospitals. Eventually, he was sent to Craiglockhart War Hospital where he met Sigfried Sassoon and was finally diagnosed with shell shock (Poetry Foundation). Similar to a lot of Freud's research at the time, Owen's

description of his wartime experience highlighted common symptoms of psychological trauma that he then described within his poetry. It is noted that:

> Owen suggests that the experience of war for him was surrealistic, as when the infantrymen dream, hallucinate, begin freezing to death, continue to march after several nights without sleep, lose consciousness from loss of blood, or enter a hypnotic state from fear or excessive guilt…[essentially] the whole humanity, has lost its moorings (Poetry Foundation).

The hypnotic state suggested by Owen calls back to early investigations into trauma and trauma theory, where traumatic events were seen as a 'shock' to the system. Through the body hallucinating and continuing to function through exhaustion, the trauma to the body coupled with the trauma to the mind all culminate through the conscious battle of wartime glory and societal expectation. As soldiers are wrestling with the limits of their ability against the guilt of national pride, Owen presents these moments in poetry as a way to have the terror of war become a universal experience. WWI poets, and especially Owen, use this platform as a way to help reiterate trauma to their readers in real time. As a result of this poetic 'horror,' "the tragedy [becomes] more overwhelming, and the pity evoked more profound, because there is no rational explanation to account for the cataclysm" that trauma survivors are forced to navigate as they experience and exit the period of WWI (Poetry Foundation).

As World War I introduced the trauma of warfare to the reader through structured means such as poetry, World War II (WWII) once again reshaped the relationship between trauma and literature and allowed for continued literary growth towards the writing style as seen within the

Vietnam literary genre[3]. WWII and the devastating events of the Holocaust shifted society from a formal, rigid structure to one of chaos. As the United States society began looking at the dynamics of warfare, they were thus forced to look more closely at the underlying values of combat. Essentially, "blood, torture, death, and terror" became the base of American culture, but were also viewed through "intense scrutiny, as in the very question of exactly how blood, torture, death, and terror can function as a social foundation" (Nabers 118). Coupled with this notion, the war effort was then "characterized by a remarkable 'failure of control'" due to the foundation then resulting in a failed military strategy of tightly controlling troops (Nabers 118).

The chaos of WWII as well as the resulting failure in traditional military means broke the modern culture and forced the population to recognize that the world of routine and structure are not so tightly wound. Regarding the literary realm, "World War II [became] the public dividing line between modernism and postmodernism" (Willis 83). In the new postmodern realm of literature, authors shifted their view into one of incompleteness and destruction; this mirrored how warfare shifted in magnitude from "rotting fields and the horrors of chemical warfare" to one where the Bomb "had taken on the very grammar of the sun" (Willis 83). Writers embraced a form of meaninglessness that allowed them to create their own rules around character, plot, wider writing genres, and literary devices, including stories and content that highlight the random, intertextual, and fragmented nature of the society that they were living in.

Such commentary on the randomness and new chaos of the everyday world also borned additional complex thought systems and theory; for example, Albert Camus, a french philosopher, crafted his concept of the absurd which was introduced via his 1942 work *The Myth*

[3] Within this brief discussion of the trends within WWII literature, I will be focusing on overarching trends throughout the period. While major works within this event of war and the Holocaust are not focused upon, their impact resonates throughout the literature produced within this period and is overarchingly included within this discussion.

of Sisyphus. Mirroring the societal breakdown surrounding him during WWII, Camus utilized *Sisyphus* to explain how the concept of the absurd emerged out of the "tension between the way one desires the world to appear and the harsh truth of human existence" (Sleasman 48). Here, embracing the absurd is seen as an ethical decision, where one can choose to either confront the absurd or embrace it; essentially, because the absurd is born out of "the ethical premise of honesty and integrity," defeating such a metaphorical concept creates what Camus notes as a collection of "values and ideas deeper and more basic than the absurd" (Sagi 189, 190). Essentially, when one attempts to understand oneself and how the world surrounding themselves operates, they discover the absurd (Sagi 191).

Camus' concept of the absurd not only focused on such values of honesty and integrity, but it also emphasized the importance of using the absurd as a metaphor to understand the everyday — much like the use of metaphor in literary pieces allows a reader to gain new insight on a particular subject. In other words, Camus noted that through understanding the absurd as a metaphor, one can "allow space for the emergence of metaphors that help make sense of the moment before us" (Sleasman 55). Through using literary means to approach the world, Camus thus points to the power of asking questions that lay at the core of one's humanity; however, in doing so, there still exists the potential for a sense of collapse. Similar to Lacan's concept of encountering the Real, Camus' philosophy of the absurd presents that "occasionally, or perhaps inevitably, 'the stage-sets collapse' and one is…forced to confront the radical incoherence perceived to be at the heart of the relation between the self and the world" (Foley 7). The experience of collapse acts as a breaking of perception between the individual and the wider community; especially in reference to the WWII period where Camus was living and writing, through this author and philosopher forcibly confronting the social, political, and overarching

wartime dynamics around him, the concept of the absurd comes through as one that contradicts war through its derivation from honesty and integrity. Such division of ideals then aligns with the literary movement of the time, where fragmentation and meaninglessness becomes the new postmodern approach. This very fragmentation and sense of distress carries through to the next stop on the timeline: the Vietnam War.

While the genre of war literature continues through the contemporary literary period and beyond, for this examination, the Vietnam war period is the last component of this timeline of Modern War Literature. Works within this period were often "narrated in retrospect [and] are also likely to be fragmentary" (Miller 237). The period of the Vietnam war was often shrouded in social and political conflict; as those drafted into the war were often cited as lost to what a 'victory' may mean, at home in the United States, there were prominent opposers to the war which resulted in frequent protests and a negative perception of those that fought within the war. The fragmented nature of the stories then reflected the fractured nature of the wartime society, for "fragmentation characterizes every aspect of the war, from America's divided opinion over it to the random and chaotic nature of the warfare itself" (Miller 241).

The fragmented nature of the literature within these stories creates a complicated pattern that alters the reader's traditional approach to narrative structure; readers attempt to place the fragmented pieces of narrative within a pattern in order to "help understand [the] dark, complex issues" of the Vietnam wartime experience (Miller 238). But despite this attempt to categorize and place the fragmented pieces of combat literature together, the Vietnam War is cited as "too large, too complex, too mediated, and too incomprehensibly terrible to synthesize" so that the attempted pattern put in place by the reader becomes obsolete (Miller 242). Instead of being able to try and comprehend the overwhelming nature of the war in one overarching narrative, critics

note that readers must be content with "one small piece at a time" in order to truly understand the foundation of fragmentation and subjectivity within this particular period of wartime literature (Miller 242, 251).

One example of this fragmentary nature within literature is Robert Stone's *Dog Soldiers*. Published in 1974, this text mirrors common literary trends within the Vietnam War period, for it is a text that "does not expose" or try to tell a tale through embellishment; instead, the novel itself is realistic, "telling a story, always working to get it told right" (Sale 410). This text follows the tale of a reporter, John Converse, and how he becomes swept up in a drug trade in the United States after spending time abroad and reporting on the Vietnam war front. Despite it being a tale of the war and the difficulty in navigating life back home, *Dog Soldiers* "assumes the war as a given and traces its effects on the noncombatants both in Vietnam and the United States" as a way to depict the turmoil of the war back within U.S. communities (Shelton 74).

In order to help depict the traumatic and chaotic change of the United States society as a result of the Vietnam War, Stone writes in a way that provides a sense of paranoia to the reader in order to create a "sense of claustrophobia" (Shelton 74). That claustrophobia then builds upon prior stepping stones within this brief literary timeline such as absurdity, and how that sense of absurdity pushes characters within the text and readers of the story to wish for a way to escape reality (Shelton 75). In line with other trends within Vietnam War literature, *Dog Soldiers* pushes the limits of structure and fictional time in order to ultimately recreate the feeling of being lost within a society that no longer exists as it did pre-war. Stone provides this commentary on society and the political ramifications of the war through acting as a form of "nineteenth-century moralist," where the author is forced to create instances where characters and readers are "required to judge the choices made by an individual or a society" (Sale 411). By depicting a

real-life sense of societal judgment, lost individual identity, and the trauma of reporting abroad within a fictional world, Stone is able to create a bubble of Vietnam emotional experience all within the pages of a text. In doing so, the author communicates two different actions to his readership: first, he is able to take on the darkness and the fear that individuals feel they embody and modify that image to illustrate the meaning behind trauma. Second, he is able to call upon common components of trauma theory: instead of depicting trauma and loss as a singular event, Stone reshapes the chaos of the Vietnam War in a way that allows readers to believe that they "have only begun to understand [their] immediate past" and pushes toward the need for a deeper understanding of self (Sale 411). As a result, Stone combines elements of trauma theory and storytelling in a way that provides a starting place to understanding trauma in the individual and the world, as well as a way for individuals to empathetically engage with other trauma survivors.

Another text that demonstrates the literary trends of war literature within the Vietnam War period is Michael Herr's 1977 novel *Dispatches*. Similar to the prior text, this novel focuses on Herr's experiences as a war correspondent in Vietnam from November 1967 to October 1968 (Jones 309). The novel is structured in a way that highlights Herr's experiences within Vietnam, but the memories and tales are altered for a literary scope; essentially, the text is "not exactly history [and] it is not exactly fiction either" (Jones 309). As a result of this in-between tale of fiction and reality, Herr's text combines components of fantasy with reality in order to help depict the wartime balance of "violence and insanity" (Cobley 97; Jones 310). This insanity is similar to *Dog Soldiers*, where Herr focuses on the breakdown of "any semblance of order among the American military in Vietnam," and thus provides a commentary on the political ramifications of entering a war that held much opposition with the people of the United States (Jones 310).

Dispatches highlights trends within the Vietnam literature time period, for his text not only blends fantasy with reality, but it also emphasizes an "apocalyptic world" that became shattered due to the imbalance between American expectation and unbridled violence and chaos — all within the text structure of a personal journal (Jones 314). This text also offers another place where readers can learn about the complicated nature of the Vietnam war through the balance of truth and fiction. In line with principles of psychoanalysis, Herr uses this twisted combination of plausible and implausible in order to demonstrate to readers that similar to those fighting during the war, one cannot necessarily control their own experiences or outcomes. Essentially, the author shows that "the subject is not in control of his discourse because the distinction between fact and fiction always threatens to break down," thus allowing the space for fantasy to fracture and trauma to set in (Cobley 100). By noting the difficulty in trying to control one's experience through manifesting fantastical experiences, Herr's graphic and detailed account of Vietnam within *Dispatches* points to one of the main components of literature within this period, and allows for a solid segue into the third and final component of this modern war literature timeline: while one can attempt to use fantasy to escape the terror of reality, fantasy cannot always hide the true trauma underneath lived experience.

This era of Vietnam War literature is where Tim O'Brien enters the timeline. During this period, O'Brien was drafted into the US Army and served in Vietnam from 1969-1970. While this author practiced writing throughout his childhood, it was not until his time at Harvard's Graduate School in 1970 that O'Brien started drafting and constructing stories based on his time in the Army. This practice in writing then led to his first published piece in 1973, *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, with additional published works following suit up through his most recent novel, *Dad's Maybe Book*, in 2019. When referencing literature of this timeframe, O'Brien notes the

potential for this genre to be "held imprisoned by the fact of [the author's own] Vietnam experiences" due to many of the authors of the period being Vietnam Veterans themselves (Bonn 1). As a result of this fear, O'Brien then emphasizes his role as a form of in-between. Within his many articles, stories, and novels, he often creates a balance between "those with personal knowledge of the war and those without" in order to not necessarily instruct, but simply share his storied experience (Bonn 2). Under the genre of Vietnam War Literature, he frequently explores the boundaries of exposing traumatic memory and experience vs fiction; he thus strikes a balance via his concepts of Story Truth and Happening Truth which allows for his stories to "have a real efficacy" that highlights the combination of fiction applied to explicit narrative (Bonn 7). The uniqueness of O'Brien's writing is that he combines this Story Truth vs Happening Truth concept in addition to the overarching Vietnam War literature trend of fragmentation in writing. The result of this combination presents the audience with works that focus on first-person experiences and perceptions of the war alongside projected possibilities and traumatic consequences. This structure of his works ultimately presents the war in pieces that once rewoven together, help the reader view a broader picture of combat experience within the Vietnam War (Miller 248).

Trauma theory and War Literature have a rich history that often intertwines in order to not only offer a way for those in combat to share their own traumas, but also as a way to unpack their wartime surroundings. As a result of this combination between theory and practice, a unique opportunity to study the pain and trauma of soldiers within literature becomes apparent; through examining the way that veteran authors use literary techniques and story, readers may track the pain and awareness within writing and begin a journey of understanding the inexplicable traumatic experiences of those fighting for their country. As referenced prior,

however, the ability to decipher and truly understand the relationship between a writer's trauma (or PTSD) from within their own writing can be extremely difficult; the shift in interpretation emphasizes the ability to focus on the text instead of the resulting gaps in storyline or traumatic memory (Pederson 338). In wrestling with concepts such as fragmentation, imagination, and the power of storytelling, readers of works such as Tim O'Brien's have the opportunity to meet the writer in the middle and begin sharing the listening load of those seeking to tell their stories. The first step, however, begins with a victim and writer's compromise between two truths: the truth in story, and the truth in memory.

CHAPTER 2

STORY TRUTH VS. HAPPENING TRUTH

Literature is one of the places where war and trauma can meet in order to begin the process of healing; one of the complications of this relationship, however, falls within the scope of truth. Often, "Soldiers…even those who have been regarded as heroes, complain bitterly that no one wants to know the real truth about war" which can hinder the ability for those in combat to begin revealing the traumatic truths of their own experiences (Herman 8). In order to try and combine the ability to tell tales while negotiating varying levels of truth, the resulting use of language can be dynamic or exaggerated in order to conceal portions of experiences that veterans may deem too traumatic for civilians. This "performative" verbal language takes on another role in relaying the truth of war through it creating "the power to enact healing, give order" and ultimately attempt to "reconstruct [the] victim's shattered psyche" (Pederson 339). In terms of applying this performative language to readers and listeners, those who accept a victim's language are then also "likely to see the literature of trauma not as a collection of faltering or failing speech acts but instead as efforts — no matter how halting—at rehabilitation" (Pederson 339).

Story Truth vs Happening Truth

When refocusing the power of language and rehabilitation within the scope of Tim O'Brien, O'Brien himself notes that the "proper treatment" of a soldier's true war experience results from storytelling (Wesley 7). This author balances the realms of culture and the "suffering and death imposed by war," but as noted by Wesley, between these two spheres "is indeed 'truth.' not the reflection of reality but an invitation to engage in the effort of revision" (15).

O'Brien's illustration of spoken and written truth is then reemphasized through Caruth's belief of the power of imagination in literature. Through using figurative language, trauma can break the boundaries of shock through "speak[ing]" and providing "a voice to traumatized individuals and populations" which becomes an art form of traumatic translation (Pederson 334; Kaplan 19).

O'Brien complicates this notion of war truth within his novel, *The Things They Carried*. Within this collection, the author focuses on the difficulty in telling war stories due to the necessary and challenging negotiation of Story Truth and Happening Truth. Specifically within the chapter "How to Tell a True War Story," O'Brien outlines five broad categories that define the difference between a true, lived war story and one that has only seemed to happen. Because this section is placed near the first third of the novel, O'Brien forces his readers to confront the veteran's tales told so far and juxtapose them against the reality that the author may or may not be sharing. This pseudo-shock to the audience's reading experiences then has the readers themselves question their ability to believe O'Brien, which builds on the fragmentary nature of the text. This novel is constructed through interweaving chapters that act as short stories to an incomplete narrative; readers of *The Things They Carried* have to utilize O'Brien's lessons of what a true war story entails and dissect the following tales of combat in terms of reality and fiction.

Looking more closely, O'Brien first breaks the mold of truth through emphasizing the impossibility for true war tales to be both moral and true. First, the author highlights that war stories are "never moral" for they cannot "instruct, nor encourage virtue, or suggest models of proper human behavior"; essentially, one can tell if a war story is true by "its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to…evil" (O'Brien *The Things* 65-6). Paralleling this, O'Brien also emphasizes the difficulty in deciphering war stories by exclaiming that "In any war story, but

especially a true one, it's difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen" (O'Brien *The Things* 67). Wesley notes that similar to O'Brien, replacing "certainty with confusion" leads the audience to shatter their preconceived ideas of war and instead, reiterate the overwhelming nature of combat experience. Through readapting reality, O'Brien leads the audience to a different form of truth that may exist outside of the political depiction and messaging that surrounded the Vietnam War (Kaplan 43). One of the connections between war fiction and memoir is that the writer may depict their truths in ways that are still explorations of the trauma itself. The author's communications are not meant to exist as a "literal rendering of 'truth'" but that "the emotions that are remembered and the ways in which the writer expresses them" offer an insight into what seemed or may have happened (Kaplan 43). In terms of *The Things They Carried*, the text may not exist as a memoir necessarily, but it does allow for the processing and physical writing down and deciphering of individual traumatic experience; as exclaimed by O'Brien, "I'm partly discovering and partly curious about or fascinated about issues of what could be true," ultimately pointing to the fact that understanding one's individual truth is part of the battle in writing down the truth for others ("Writing" 4:15-24).

A third guideline presented by O'Brien is that in some cases, "you can't even tell a true war story. Sometimes it's just beyond telling" (O'Brien *The Things* 68). Here, the author calls upon the experience of trauma through pointing to trauma's cyclical nature of flashbacks, memories, or otherwise repeated reminders of the traumatic incidents themselves. The narrator of this chapter reiterates that the true war story "never seems to end" which aligns with Lacan's powerful concept of the Real (O'Brien *The Things* 72). The Real functions "not as something that resists symbolization, as a meaningless leftover that cannot be integrated into the symbolic universe, but, on the contrary, as its last support" (Žižek 31). Through this realm existing as the

ultimate support of the symbolic universe, shattering one's perception through encountering the Real, as for example through a traumatic event, has the ability to "derail the balance of our daily lives" (Žižek 29). O'Brien references this imbalance through reiterating that cyclical traumatic experiences result from traumatic encounters and that those stories are "beyond telling," for the ability to put words to the event is impossible due to the very inability to describe the Real.

The lack of verbal description leads into another point illustrated by O'Brien; the audience themselves may have no words after witnessing the tale of a true war story. More explicitly, the author states that:

> 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. You can't extract the meaning without unraveling the deeper meaning. And in the end, really, there's nothing much to say about a true war story, except maybe 'Oh.' (O'Brien *The Things* 74).

This powerful 'Oh' creates another tie to not only the absurdity and destructive experience of war, but also patriotic expectation[4]. Despite the patriotic push for soldiers to embody "valor, pride in country, noble patriotism, or victory for the State," the collective dive into "true" war stories does not create a moral or favorable view of said beliefs; instead or "rationalizing" or "valorizing" the war, a true war story "recognizes it as wrong and damaging, a war with few heroes and an enemy as human as the soldier in the next trench" (Ooms 38). The collective experiences between the "Oh" of warfare reality in addition to the traumatic reality of human to human combat, call upon the notion of how "innocence literally cannot survive the ugly surprises of war," for such ugly realities depict that a "true" war story is multifaceted and fractured (Zeitlin 156). That ugliness, however, can also translate into an alternative view of beauty. Despite

[4] Here is a brief commentary on political expectation within one of O'Brien's notes regarding true war stories. A more in-depth examination into the power of listening, societal expectation, and political influence within the Vietnam War will be reviewed within Chapter 4.

O'Brien "repeatedly tell[ing] us…that the stories he's told may not have happened the way he said they did," he utilizes the brutal imagery of warfare in order to illustrate the traumatic beauty of surrounding combat and that for the author, "Vietnam was more than terror…[it] was partly love" (Ooms 39; O'Brien "The Vietnam"). He notes that the truth of war:

> is also beauty. For all its horror, you can't help but gape at the awful majesty of combat…It's not pretty, exactly. It's astonishing. It fills the eye. It commands you. You hate it, yes, but your eyes do not…and a true war story will tell the truth about this, though the truth is ugly (O'Brien *The Things* 77).

O'Brien utilizes such descriptive and difficult imagery during the chapter "The Man I Killed." Within this chapter, O'Brien illustrates the tale of the first man that he killed through stylistic representations of panic and shock. The first paragraph of this chapter extends almost two full pages and is solely about the actual and potential descriptions of the human he has killed in combat. He opens the piece explaining how "his jaw was in his throat, his upper lip and teeth were gone, his one eye was shut, his other eye was a star-shaped hole" as well as how "his neck was open to the spinal cord and the blood there was thick and shiny" in order to exclaim that this was the factual wound that killed the man (O'Brien *The Things* 118).

Next, the paragraph then shifts to the hypothetical, where the narrator of "The Man I Killed" assumes that the man that was killed "had been born, maybe, in 1946 in the village of My Khe," as well as how "he should have been taught that to defend the land was a man's highest duty and highest privilege" (O'Brien *The Things* 119). By illustrating deep, descriptive, emotive imagery followed by imaginative hypotheticals, O'Brien illustrates the span of trauma, panic, and dissociation through a sole paragraph. Judith Herman notes that "A narrative that does not include the traumatic imagery and bodily sensations is barren and incomplete," (177). Within

the aforementioned paragraph, the audience is able to see the full extent of delving into a traumatic memory in order to help create a form of “restorative truth telling” that results in an opportunity to speak of trauma in a way that allows for healing to create a reclaiming of self and experience (Herman 181).

This concept of restorative truth telling is further amplified through O’Brien admitting later in the novel to never killing the young man at all. He states in the chapter “Good Form” that “I did not kill him. But I was present, you see, and my presence was guilt enough” (O’Brien *The Things* 171). Through shaping the story with descriptive imagery, which is often associated with cyclical traumatic memory, O’Brien attempts to help place the reader in a state of second-hand trauma. O’Brien explains that regarding “The Man I Killed,” “I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth” (*The Things* 171). In reiterating an ugly truth, O’Brien echoes how the truth of war is not solely formed in valor and meant to appeal to a moral center (Ooms 39). As a result, audiences are left with true war stories that must “not uplift the heart” and instead, “turn the stomach” (Ooms 39).

Literary Technique

O’Brien often plays with the boundaries of truth, but he also amplifies the confusion and complexity of the Vietnam War experience through breaking traditional linear storylines. Wartime stories from the Vietnam period often are fragmented, or do not complete a whole, complete story from start to finish. This complicates a reader's experience for “no matter how sophisticated they are, [readers] still desire stories with a beginning, a middle, an end, and, if possible, a summary moral as a postscript” despite the “baffling” subject of the Vietnam War (Miller 249). O’Brien dispelled the idea of a moral end to a true war story, but his own texts utilize this fragmented approach in order to offer a way to relay to the reader his own traumatic

and fragmented experience of military combat within this period. Miller reiterates this point by stating that "as Americans, we are encouraged by such fragmentary narratives to make sense of the war as it applies to each of us. Once we let others tell the story for us, [veteran authors] risk losing the war again — that is to say, losing it by assuming that it can be fully understood" (248).

O'Brien calls upon this very balance between processing and listening through the structure of his texts. For example, *The Things They Carried* operates as a short story collection with a continuing thread tying them all together despite being woven between multiple timelines and author interjections. In other words, "the memories…are fragments, pieces, that weave back and forth between different phases" of memory and experience and ultimately allow for Vietnam to feel more "realistic" via O'Brien's "narrative strategy…to shatter the mirror and to investigate the shards instead" (Kaplan 65; Miller 239). O'Brien emphasizes the power of these "shards" of history through reiterating that the cyclical nature of *The Things They Carried* is meant to be reflective of "collective memory" or a collective history of his own experiences with fellow soldiers ("Keeping" 16-18s). In piecing together "snapshots of memory" the aforementioned text becomes a book where the reader can "Cycl[e] back at different angles" in order to examine a new "way of seeking that which is gone" ("Keeping" 1:06-11, 1:44-52). This most closely mimics O'Brien's own experience grappling with traumatic memory, for he noted that regarding *The Things They Carried*, he "didn't plan in a cerebral way the form of [the text]"; instead, O'Brien "took advantage of what was natural" to himself and his traumatic experiences ("The Things" 4:45-55).

When examining Story Truth vs Happening Truth, O'Brien reminds readers how "true war stories do not generalize" and that they "do not indulge in abstraction or analysis," due to the fact that "we all live partly in our daydreams" and that the boundaries between living in a

warzone and the safety of imagination operate in tandem for one “flow[s] in and out of these two” (*The Things* 74; “The Things” 3:30-3, 4:05-10). O’Brien often mentions his characters moving between the everyday life of being a combat soldier and coping with imagination as a subtle integration in plot description. For example, within *The Things They Carried*, O’Brien casually mentions how “in the late afternoon…he would dig his foxhole, wash his hands under a canteen, unwrap the letters…and spend the last hour of light pretending” (*The Things* 1). This everyday escapism soon augments pretending into dreaming and illusion as a way to navigate the fragmentation of wartime experience while living amongst the trauma in real time. O’Brien notes that “the thing about a story is that you dream it as you tell it, hoping that others might then dream along with you, and in this way memory and imagination and language combine to make spirits in the head” which results in an “illusion of aliveness” (*The Things* 218). That very illusion aligns with how trauma victims reshape memories and block out others as a way to cope with the dramatic shift in their own personal awareness. In having that very story and fragmented, collective memory all housed within a novel, O’Brien also creates an ‘illusion of aliveness’ as a way to tie back to Happening Truth; by making the story feel even more real, despite it being partially imagined, O’Brien can “resurrect through imagination” his own experiences of wartime in Vietnam as a way to try and have others listen (“Keeping” 2:14-6).

The technique of fragmentation and imagination also flows into O’Brien’s novel, *Going After Cacciato*, where plotlines and timelines of present, past, and hypothetical intertwine in order to demonstrate the power of traumatic experiences in conjunction with the possibility of dissociation through escaping the present day via imagination. Herman writes that this idea of compensating traumatic reality with imagination is not uncommon within the wartime experience, for “soldiers in wartime responded to the losses and injuries within their group with

diminished confidence in their own ability to make plans and take initiative" which then resulted in "increased superstitious and magical thinking" (Herman 46). This form of increased magical thinking relays back to Lacan's vision of the Real. In having the Real exist as a "second form of fantasy," it begins to operate as one that exists as a "'missing link' [which] guarantee[s]s the consistency of our symbolic reality" (Ẑiẑek 120). By breaking one's view of the symbolic world through encountering the trauma of the realm of the Real, one's ability to fantasize or imagine then begins to act as a form of repair in order to falsely reestablish a connection back to a pre-trauma world.

Going After Cacciato brings this pseudo-repair and imaginative coping to light through its balance of "experimental realism and fantastic imagination" as a way to help understand one's traumatic experiences (Bonn 7). *Cacciato* often utilizes imagination as a way to escape the horrors of war, yet the imagined experience itself begins to become more complex and reflective of the inescapability of war due to the present-day terror seeping in to one's safety in imagination. Ẑiẑek notes that "The more we find ourselves in total ambiguity, not knowing where 'reality' ends and 'hallucination'...begins, the more menacing this domain appears" (90). In having Paul Berlin, *Cacciato*'s protagonist, narrator, and dreamer, evolve his imagined world to become more reflective of his real, traumatic one, the ability to escape via imagination becomes impossible despite "Pretending [being] his best trick to forget the war" (O'Brien *Going After* 10). This is further amplified through the structure of the text. Readers are not able to tell until about one third of the way through the text that the book is structured through multiple timelines including "present, past, and dreamed" as well as what is fiction or reality (Bonn 7). Through examining these various timelines on a closer level, these different forms of narration

offer a window into the trauma of wartime experiences as well as their implication on an individual's physical and mental being.

Going After Cacciato first uses a sense of imagination within the "Real Time" sections of the text. Often within these chapters, Paul Berlin is reflecting on some of his current war experiences, and detailing stories of how there were battles of power dynamics among military leaders and footsoldiers, the journey of how Berlin grew in his own military confidence, or how other members of their team had died in accidents or in combat. One of the first mentions of imagination comes early in the novel where Berlin and his group were asked to chase after their lost comrade, Cacciato. Berlin says that "He tried to imagine a proper ending…He imagined it. He imagined the many dangers of the march…but, yes, he also imagined the good times ahead, the sting of aloneness, the great new quiet" (O'Brien *Going After* 23). However, he also uses this prediction to drive imagination as a coping mechanism. Opposite to the dangers of the journey ahead, he also imagines that "the trails would go dry, the sun would show, and, yes, there would be changing foliage and seasons and great expanses of silence, and songs, and pretty girls…and, where the road ended, Paris" (O'Brien *Going After* 23). Up until this point, Berlin and his team had experienced death, decay, and desertion, which fueled the need for creating an imaginative space of possibility. By shifting his focus to the trails, sun, seasons, silence, and the hope of another day, O'Brien juxtaposes Berlin's continued trauma with the possibility for escape. This opposition then fuels a timeline jump where O'Brien begins playing with fragmentation; where audiences first experience memory, now, O'Brien shifts the reader to focus on real-time coping.

A second timeline within *Going After Cacciato* exists within the "Observation Post" chapters. Whereas the prior timeline of wartime memory and reflection exists in chapters that hint at the memory or story to be told, within the "Observation Post" sections, the reader gets to

listen to Paul Berlin in real time; these sections illustrate how Berlin is on night watch "high in the tower by the sea, the night soft all around him" with his fellow soldiers sleeping nearby. Here, the reader has a chance to hear how Berlin is designing his imaginative storyline through reflecting on his wartime experience, with Berlin even noting himself how he "wondered, not for the first time, about the immense powers of his own imagination" where he can "draw out [an idea] as an artist draws out his visions" (O'Brien *Going After* 27). This hybrid chapter serves as an illustration of the traumatized soldier in active duty, utilizing escapism through his own imagination based on his past experiences.

Those lines of escapism, however, often show the difficulty in maintaining lines between the real and the imaginary — much like the boundary between Story Truth and Happening Truth. Berlin questions "what part was fact and what part was the extension of fact? And how were facts separated from possibilities? What had really happened and what merely might have happened? How did it end?" ultimately to reiterate once again that the trick is to "search out the place where fact ended and imagination took over" — a still quite complex task (O'Brien *Going After* 27). These lines exist along the difficult boundary of fantasy and real-life, which points to one of the fundamental components of psychoanalysis; in reflection of Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, Ẑiẑek notes that fantasy allows for the construction of desire, points to what would hypothetically fulfill that desire, and leads an individual to find their role in the world as a result of that fantastical construction of want and need; essentially, "*through fantasy, we learn how to desire*" (Ẑiẑek 6, author's emphasis).

Berlin's desire shows in his ability to use fantasy to escape the warzone in favor of the aforementioned sun, seasons, and silence, to ultimately end up within the walls of Paris. Berlin

notes the power of this use of fantasy in that it not only is “a way of asking questions” regarding his past trauma and future possibilities, but that it also allows for him to maintain control:

> This night, posted by the sea, he was gallant and wide awake and nimble-headed. His fingers tingled. Excited by the possibilities, but still in control. That was the important part -- he was in control. He was calm. Clear thinking helped. Concentrating, figuring out details, it helped plenty (O’Brien *Going After* 63).

Before this moment of clarity in the first of multiple “Observation Post” chapters, Berlin reflected on the chaos of war and how the journey to find Cacciato began as an order from an ailing general. Here, Berlin emphasizes the power of imagination to not only try and discover his ultimate desire through fantasy, but to also exert control over his own hypothetical future in a world of wartime chaos. This control over the chaos becomes distorted, however, as the text continues; while Paul Berlin exerts excited yet controlled measure over his hypothetical future, soon, his real wartime past begins to seep into his imaginative future and blur the boundaries between his own creation of Story Truth and Happening Truth.

While the blurring of truths continues throughout *Cacciato*, readers begin to see reality creep into Berlin’s imagined world soon after the tri-part timeline of the text is revealed. Berlin mentioned how having a clear mind and control helped to not only escape his current environment, but also allow him to envision a new one; this begins to meld within an “Observation Post” chapter, where the true memory of blowing up tunnels begins to infiltrate Berlin’s imagined story of traveling to Paris. Initially, within the chapter “How Bernie Lynn died after Frenchie Tucker,” Berlin describes that “The earth was shaking…The earth kept shaking” as he and his team were searching and blowing up tunnels along their route (O’Brien *Going After* 66). The feeling of shaking then reappeared shortly after in the next dream-based chapter, “A

Hole in the Road to Paris," where the dream version of Paul Berlin notes that "The road was shaking. The whole road. Instantly there came a great buckling feeling, an earthquake, a tremor that rippled along the road in waves, splitting and tearing" (O'Brien *Going After* 75). The physical mimicry of the world shattering illustrates not only the difficulty in being able to truly escape the trauma of war, but that those very experiences create an indelible mark on the psyche of an individual. Similar to Lacan's concept of the Real and fantasy, there is a fine balance between confronting the Real and utilizing fantasy, a component of the Real itself, to falsely build a connection back to the realm of prior self-perception.

Eventually, that false connection within the realm of imagination can no longer hold and the escapism of fantasy falls victim to reality. Within *Cacciato*, the chapters that focus on Paul Berlin's imagined story all have Paris or the road to Paris in the title: for example, within the above paragraph, the fantasy storyline where the road was shaking and splitting is entitled "A Hole in the Road to Paris." The full acceptance of reality begins to show itself through these Paris chapters, where Berlin's own characters admit that reality is the only way to complete a journey. One of Berlin's fantasy characters asks him "what happens if you find [Cacciato]? If you catch him? What happens then?" in which the imagined Berlin responds "Back to reality…If we catch him, then it's back to the realms of reality" (O'Brien *Going After* 114).

In addition to the tri-part timeline within *Cacciato*, O'Brien provides one final, overarching commentary on the idea of Story Truth and Happening Truth via the concept of the Ultimate War Story. Within Paul Berlin's imagination, he and his team had just been captured in Tehran, negotiated their way into being released, and were now speaking with a local military officer in a bar. Amongst their conversations of war, bravery, and valor, O'Brien slips in reminders via Berlin and his team that war is not a universal traumatic experience. Berlin's

comrades in the imagined sequence share that "Each soldier, he has a different war. Even if it is the same war, it is a different war" as well as that "We're made differently, we see differently, we remember differently (O'Brien *Going After* 196). The idea of traumatic differentiation aligns with similar concepts such as those studied by Herman and Kaplan, where each instance of trauma can be augmented depending on the individual experiencing the traumatic event. This is also where fantasy can be differentiated depending on the individual. Žižek notes that "fantasy is the absolutely particular way every one of us structures his/her 'impossible' relation to the traumatic Thing" and that through these means of imagination and fantasy situations, that one can conceal the fractured reality against the "inconsistent big Other" of the symbolic order (167).

Within this portion of the novel, O'Brien illustrates Berlin's relationship to the 'traumatic Thing' as one of avoidance. As Berlin's comrade Oscar begins goading the doctor of the group to share the ultimate war story of Billy Boy Watkins, Berlin is described to feel "cold and drunk" as well as have "legs [that] were weak," which ultimately lead him to "hear the music inside…but he did not hear the ultimate war story" (O'Brien *Going After* 203). By having Berlin physically react to the memory of a traumatic event as well as block out the story, O'Brien illustrates that Berlin's fantasy realm is unable to approach repairing his understanding of self in the world; essentially, he is rejecting confronting the symbolic reality of his wartime experience, as in the "Observation Post" portions of the text, and chooses to further delve into a sense of fantasy so augmented that reality is forcibly blocked out. Žižek calls upon this concept of fantasy and trauma through reiterating how each individual contains what he coins as a 'stopgap.' More specifically, he brings forth Freudian concepts and relays that "every manifest dream content, contains *at least one* ingredient that functions as a stopgap, as a filler holding the place of what is necessarily *lacking* in it" which then "holds within it the place of what this imaginary scene must

'repress,' exclude, force out, in order to constitute itself" (Žižek 52, authors emphasis). By Berlin designing this fantasy dream space as a local bar filled with college-aged people in a foreign land (minus the gruesome details of war), he calls upon O'Brien's experience of being drafted into a war soon after deciding to leave college. Through providing this fantasy space that was initially rejected in real life, Berlin, and tangentially O'Brien, present a sense of repressing wartime trauma through escaping reality and dreaming about what could be or could have been.

Despite painting the possibility of the future through imagination, O'Brien has the reader quickly escape the Ultimate War Story in order to focus on how reality ultimately wins. To conclude the Story Truth vs Happening Truth debate, Berlin's separation between reality and dream becomes fully shattered as the reader gets closer to the end of the text. Within a dream chapter, the imagined Berlin notes that "You could run, but you couldn't outrun the consequences of running. Not even in imagination" (O'Brien *Going After* 226). This aside to the reader initiates a full break of the imagined fantasy land, where now, instead of separating reality and war from the realm of potential, the dream begins to be infiltrated with comments that reiterate how false the imagined dream is. For example, within "Outlawed on the Road to Paris," a fantasy chapter, Berlin notes that "He felt Oscar staring at him from across the room — a long, hard stare — as if to accuse. As if to say, *Your fuckin dream, man. Now do something*" (O'Brien *Going After* 228-9, author's emphasis). This interpreted statement from Oscar is the first time within the text that O'Brien, and thus Paul Berlin, openly show to the reader that the journey to Paris is in itself an "act of high imagination," or "cartoon of the mind" (O'Brien *Going After* 242). The cartoon aspect is even further pushed as Berlin begins to embrace the act of imagination when trying to think of a way for him and his team to escape a dire situation on the streets of Paris. He thinks "And then a getaway car — why not? It was a night of miracles, and

he was a miracle man. So why not? Yes, a *car*" (O'Brien *Going After* 243, author's emphasis). This elaborate fantasy sequence initially provided one way for Berlin to try and separate himself from the "facts of war that he cannot confront," so by breaking away from the escapism that fantasy provides, O'Brien actively illustrates the inability for one to escape the trauma of reality (Bonn 8). Essentially, Berlin is stuck revolving around the complex nature of warfare and despite potentially achieving a stronger sense of self, he finds that "The realities always catch you" and "imagination, like reality, has its limits" (Bonn 8; O'Brien *Going After* 303, 321).

O'Brien uses the concepts of Story Truth and Happening Truth throughout his collection of works, but the dynamic interplay between memory, truth, and the act of writing especially come together within both *The Things They Carried* as well as *Going After Cacciato*. While each of these texts illustrate the guidelines for creating war stories that have the chance to speak to the truth while not illustrating the full truth, the concept of the Ultimate War Story is openly shattered through the frequent interjection of reality within a dreamspace. Despite trying to satisfy those seeking to "know what cannot be known" or those that question "why read about the war if we cannot arrive at the truth?" O'Brien comes to terms with the idea that "a true war story is never about war" but that "it's about love and memory. It's about sorrow" and the complicated nature of trying to "make [stories] present" (Miller 239; O'Brien *The Things* 81, 172). Ultimately, balancing the truth is something that allows O'Brien to break the perception of "just one more war story" in order to try and save something "essential and enduring" for those that choose to listen (O'Brien *Going After* 335; "Keeping" 3:00-09).

CHAPTER 3

THE TRAUMATIC TALE & SYMPATHETIC LISTENER

When referencing the influential power of the Vietnam landscape, O'Brien writes in *The Things They Carried* that "Everything talks. The trees talk politics, the monkeys talk religion. The whole country. Vietnam. The place…truly *talks*" (71). Bleeding into the wartime experience, O'Brien reiterates the power and trauma of Vietnam through demonstrating how he became one with the land; he notes that "I was the beast on their lips — I was Nam — the horror, the war" (O'Brien *The Things* 199). This dynamic shift between observation to a state of being introduces the cyclical concept of listening; by the author first listening to the land and then becoming the land that once again tells stories of Vietnam, O'Brien demonstrates the unique relationship between storyteller, listener, and witness. In other words, the dangerous absorption of war trauma becomes equated with not only the power of speaking, but also the act of listening. When continuing the examination of the power of healing through storytelling, the vocalization of trauma comes to fruition through the power of another person within the storytelling exchange: a listener. This listener, however, has the potential to provide both positive and negative spaces for healing as a result of their approach to listening. By examining instances of successful and unsuccessful witnessing within the world of O'Brien's texts, the role of the sympathetic listener heightens in importance; not only can readers see the aftermath of characters listening within the text, but they also have the chance to view O'Brien within the lens of the speaker, and the reader in the role of witness.

When analyzing the power of listening within the context of therapy and trauma navigation, Forter reiterates the power of verbalizing trauma. Specifically, they note that curing

patients depends on the power to "recall and put into words" the traumatic encounter, which ultimately cycles back to the broader psychoanalytic field; essentially, the storytelling from patients allows "the naming and integration of trauma into the patient's self-understanding" (Forter 263). The only complication to this experience, however, is that in sharing such tales of life-changing trauma, speakers are doing so in an act of load sharing, where they are seeking to have others understand their full, detailed trauma. Herman notes that a successful exchange of such traumatic experiences depends upon trust, where combat veterans specifically "will not form a trusting relationship [with their listening partner] until they are convinced that [they] can stand to hear the details of the war story" (138). As stated within Chapter 2, O'Brien paints a picture of trying to balance his true experiences with an altered version through creating the divide between Story Truth and Happening Truth. Herman posits that shielding such accuracies come back to a lack of trust within the listener, or in this case, O'Brien's intended audience; while trust may be one of the main components in having someone listen to a war story, it is important to remember the difficulty that bringing up such memories can create. O'Brien states within *The Things They Carried* this very feeling. He notes that "Even now…the story makes me squirm. For more than twenty years I've had to live with it, feeling the shame, trying to push it away," but that through the power of storytelling, an "act of remembrance, [and] by putting facts down on paper" that the healing process can begin, and that by having an empathetic listener, he can release "some of the pressure on [his] dreams" (O'Brien *The Things* 37).

Veterans as Storytellers

The choice to recognize the terror of a victim's experience ultimately lies with the storyteller. In choosing to do so, however, survivors are able to access an "essential element of posttraumatic growth" that also allows for an attempt to "rebuild the assumptive world" as well

as reclaim an overarching "sense of coherence" (Herman 175; Sullivan & Starnino 38). O'Brien first illustrates this difficulty in comprehending and verbalizing trauma within *The Things They Carried*. Within the text, O'Brien demonstrates the shock of bringing death upon another as he narrates a conversation between himself and his comrade Kiowa after O'Brien killed a young man. Kiowa suggests that O'Brien needed some "mental R&R" but quickly shifts to a panicked dialogue absent of physical descriptors:

> Then he said, 'Man, I'm sorry.'
>
> Then later he said, 'Why not talk about it?;
>
> Then he said, 'Come on, man, talk.' (O'Brien *The Things* 124)

But despite this plea, the audience only gains the following descriptor of the young man who was killed. O'Brien writes that "He was a slim, dead, almost dainty young man of about twenty. He lay with one leg bent beneath him, his jaw in his throat, his face neither expressive nor inexpressive. One eye was shut. The other was a star-shaped hole" which is followed by one final, desperate plea from Kiowa: "Talk" (O'Brien *The Things* 124).

Keeping in mind O'Brien's balance between Story Truth and Happening Truth within the scope of telling war stories, the above passage illustrates two different facets of a traumatic, wartime experience. First, O'Brien presents the power and shock of trauma through forcing the audience to experience trauma through dialogue only. Kiowa's panicked pleas to reach O'Brien are presented as stacked and rushed; this not only illustrates Kiowa's panic towards his comrade, but that O'Brien himself is unresponsive. The blank, unresponsive participation of O'Brien only becomes clarified through the brief look into his thoughts. Here, the audience sees an impressive and terrifying death that serves as a shock to O'Brien's reality — a shock not unlike the experience of Lacan's the Real, where the forced confrontation of the societal systems at play

beyond one's awareness in their reality results in a colossal division of perceived versus actual existence. Essentially, by O'Brien's character experiencing an event that runs outside of his expected norm, he unwittingly learns that his place in the world, and that his supposed rules of how he is to live in that world, are a false construction. O'Brien thus begins to recognize that his perceived image of himself does not align with the reality brought upon himself via the Real. By simply ending this chapter of *The Things They Carried* with Kiowa's final call for his comrade to 'Talk,' O'Brien not only presents the difficulty in beginning to comprehend experienced trauma, but also that the very experience of trauma calls for the necessity of listeners. Listening, however, can come with an additional layer of difficulty. Farrell notes that if a listener (or witness) chooses to participate in listening to a tale of trauma, "the trauma victim makes the witness or confessor recognize and acknowledge the event" so that they can no longer "turn a blind eye to suffering and atrocity" (199). O'Brien places that call within his texts, for the act of writing allows the "swirl of memories" to be "separate[d] from yourself" in order to "pin down certain truths" (O'Brien *The Things* 152). The verbalized memories then create a "partnership between a storyteller and an audience who work together to get at truth" which translates to the roles of storyteller and listening witness (Farrell 197).

The Act of Listening

The complexity of listening to a tale becomes augmented when examining the role and scope of a listener within the broader landscape of victim experience. In *Going After Cacciato*, O'Brien powerfully points out that "after a battle each soldier will have different stories to tell, vastly different stories," and that "when a war is ended it is as if there have been a million wars, or as many wars as there were soldiers" (196). Each of those different stories encapsulate a uniquely individual experience, and it is through the role of the sympathetic listener that in

recognizing that complexity of shared experience, the healing process can begin (Farrell 186). When looking more closely at the role of a sympathetic listener, Kaplan notes that acting as a listener to a textual representation of verbalized trauma commonly follows specific techniques; usually, witnessing a tale occurs when "a text aims to move the viewer emotionally but without sensationalizing or overwhelming her with feeling that makes understanding impossible" (Kaplan 23). Additionally, Kaplan highlights that the act of witnessing or acting as a sympathetic listener involves not only empathy, but also an "understanding [of] the structure of injustice" within the broader societal structure which can produce a newfound sense of community (Kaplan 23). Sympathetic listeners ultimately take on a role where they can "feel the pain evoked by empathy," while also expanding their understanding of what it means to be a survivor of trauma as well as the "politics of trauma being possible" (Kaplan 123).

While sympathetic listeners all must utilize empathy in order to emotionally connect to their victim's stories, when examining a written tale, additional facets of reading and audience-text relationships come into play. In reference to reading, Lacan notes that "all texts have an implicit or implied addressee — a reader" and that the reader-text relationship is born through a unique interaction between the two (Homer 124). As readers "intervene in the text through the very act of reading," the text is simultaneously "guid[ing] and manipulat[ing]" a reader's desires; this joint manipulation or navigation of desires then relays back to the concept of transference, where a physical text allows for a space that exists between the spaces of past and present, fiction and reality (Homer 124). Essentially, a text allows for an alternate space where reader and writer can meet in order to collectively achieve and understand the goals of one another. Closely related to Lacan's concept of transference, the reading theory of Scholes points towards quality reading and how it requires interacting with every text sympathetically, "trying

to get inside it, to understand the intentionality behind its composition" (118). This sympathetic approach is balanced and followed by the necessity to also read unsympathetically, where critical readings allow for interaction and analysis (Scholes 118). Ultimately, reading, parallel to listening, involves a sympathetic and empathetic approach to discern intention while also examining that intention within an analytical lens (Scholes 118).

Overall, the presentation of a trauma victim's story within the written word creates a unique relationship between the author and sympathetic listener. Within written tales, the stories themselves seek to "collectively…induce a kind of signification trauma in the reader," where the novel's form illustrates a way to "say" the tale of written trauma in a way that "must be transmitted and known *as* trauma" (Forter 279, author's emphasis). Navigating this new understanding of trauma counters the belief of the text supposedly knowing all or acting as a source material and instead, refers back to Lacan's concept of transference, where the text itself becomes a new format for the reader, text, and author to navigate reality (Homer 123). As a result, within the realm of a written tale, the sympathetic listener becomes an "innocent third" who must navigate the emotional burden of empathetically experiencing a relived trauma while also encountering their own confrontation with the Real and a shattering of their own perception of reality (Ẑiẑek 72). These moments of existing as a sympathetic listener or innocent third come to fruition within O'Brien's texts, where listening, and listening carefully, is "difficult work" that foundationally relies on the bond between victim, author, reader, listener, and text (Farrell 196).

Listening and O'Brien

The representations of listening within O'Brien's texts, and specifically within *The Things They Carried*, represent both occurrences of successful and unsuccessful empathetic listening. In each instance, the trauma victim shares their story to "a bystander [in order] to share

the burden of pain," but it is the dynamic of the victim/listener after the encounter that demonstrates how effective or ineffective the listening exchange is (Herman 8). The action of telling a story creates "a change in the abnormal processing of traumatic memory" which ultimately allows for the terror or trauma within the victim to be "reversed through the use of words" (Herman 183). This reversal can first be seen within the chapter "Notes," where Tim O'Brien, speaking as the author of the text, describes a letter exchange with his comrade Norman Bowker.

The chapter preceding "Notes," "Speaking of Courage," focuses on the character Norman Bowker and offers a brief window into his adjustment back to civilian life. Here, Norman is continuously revolving around a lake, imagining a hypothetical conversation with his father regarding almost getting the Silver Star. Tim O'Brien wrote in "Notes" that the real-life Norman Bowker sent him a "long, disjointed letter in which Bowker described the problem of finding a meaningful use for his life after the war" (O'Brien *The Things* 149). The letter revealed that Bowker was sifting through memories where across "seventeen handwritten pages…the tone jump[ed] from self-pity, to anger, to irony, to guilt, to a kind of feigned indifference," and ultimately showed that "He didn't know how to feel" (O'Brien *The Things* 150).

Letters were and are not an uncommon method of storytelling and communication to an outside audience. During wartime, soldiers often used letters as a way to "communicat[e] their experiences with those back home" no matter their own individual balance between Story Truth and Happening Truth (Farrell 188). In the case of Norman Bowker, he self-disclosed that "It's almost like [he] got killed over in Nam" and that through experiencing other written mediums by O'Brien, he was able to bring back "all kinds of memories" including "the villes and paddies and rivers," and recognize characters such as himself within the printed pages (O'Brien *The Things*

150-1). This recognition allowed for an initial empathetic connection, where Norman as a reader is able to sympathetically engage with O'Brien's recounting of their wartime adventures; this places Norman as one of O'Brien's sympathetic listeners. This empathetic connection then catapults Norman into seeking his own assistance in understanding his wartime trauma, and thus the letter to his comrade.

Through the act of being able to empathetically recognize his own experience within the lens of another soldier, Norman Bowker in return begins his own process of healing through storytelling via the act of letter writing, and ultimately, through the surrogacy storytelling of his own experiences via O'Brien's authorial hands. Within "Notes," Norman's letter requested that O'Brien should:

> write a story about a guy who feels like he got zapped over in that shithole. A guy who can't get his act together and just drives around town all day and can't think of any damn place to go and doesn't know how to get there anyway. This guy wants to talk about it, but he *can't*…If you want, you can use the stuff in this letter…I'd write it myself except that I can't ever find any words, if you know what I mean, and I can't figure out what exactly to *say*. (*The Things* 151, author's emphasis)

Through this passage, Norman illustrates his own "disjointed" frustrations of his own wartime trauma in a way that allows for creative Story Truth interjections. By choosing to emphasize the absence of organization ("can't get his act together") and direction, Norman illustrates the profound impact of his shattered reality; this is further emphasized through him declaring that he "can't ever find any words" or that he "can't figure out what exactly to say." The absence of linguistic influence references back to Lacan and the Symbolic order, where some of one's concrete understanding of their reality is born out of tying concepts to language. Through

Norman being unable to call upon such language, the audience is shown that Norman is continually encountering the traumatic influence of The Real and that the magnitude of such pain further divides his mental reality from his physical one.

This very divide "haunted [O'Brien] for more than a month" where the desperation written within the letter seemed to outweigh the attempted storytelling (O'Brien *The Things* 152). The cycle of O'Brien writing, Norman listening, Norman writing, and O'Brien then listening, comes to a close as O'Brien chooses to act as a vicarious storyteller and writes "Speaking of Courage." O'Brien notes that the story frightened him so much that he "was afraid to speak directly, afraid to remember," but then over the next several months, he "managed to…tak[e] pride in a shadowy, idealized recollection" of the virtues of Norman's suggested story (O'Brien *The Things* 153). As Norman's story becomes written down in O'Brien's voice, the cycle of listening and empathy continues via the story of Norman/O'Brien as it is offered to a textual audience for a willing sympathetic listener. This successful example of listening and engaging with trauma with empathy demonstrates how the willingness of a witness can offer the next steps towards healing, and a place to begin dissecting the influence of The Real. While Norman did find the ability to identify and share his story with O'Brien in order to begin the healing process, unfortunately, Norman Bowker soon hanged himself "in the locker room of a YMCA in his hometown" not long after "Speaking of Courage" was written (O'Brien *The Things* 149). Storytelling has the ability to initiate the healing process, but it is important to note that due to the variety of types and intensities of trauma, victims may also need diverse supplementary support when navigating their traumatic memories. Within the case of Norman Bowker, based on what is revealed through the text, the exchange of written war stories and shared empathy allowed for a continued place of connection between not only soldier to soldier,

but also eventually author to audience. It is through exchanges of empathy and willing, listening witnesses such as that between O'Brien and Bowker that allow for the potential for healing to happen, and for the chance for victims to find healing and friendship within a world that created such grief.

Norman Bowker and Tim O'Brien had the chance to successfully practice listening and witnessing one another's stories, and as a result, provided a cycle of awareness that illustrates the power of trauma and the needed interjection of societal change; however, for many successful instances of witnessing, there are also many moments where listening is not practiced with empathy and the sharing of trauma is rejected. Farrell notes that "confessing is closely related to witnessing," and that in having the courage to confess trauma but be rejected by a witness, healing halts; essentially, without a fully engaged sympathetic listener, there can simply be no confession (Farrell 196). By having either no witness or a selectively present witness there for a trauma victim's story, the victim themselves can develop deep feelings of rejection and failure so much so that they gain a "pervasive sense of betrayal" that extends to "one's country or even God" (Sullivan & Starnino 27).

One such representation of betrayal within Tim O'Brien's text *The Things They Carried* exists as a result of letter writing. Contrary to Norman and O'Brien's exchange of empathetic listening, Rat Kiley, another comrade of O'Brien's, experienced an unsuccessful instance of storytelling through receiving no reply to a letter he sent in memory of a fallen comrade. While letters are often one method to try and connect to others, "letters written to an absent listener frequently misfire, [and] fail to bridge the gap between war and home," (Farrell 188). This absence of successful listening can then lead to a dangerous encounter of retraumatization, for by

not listening to war stories "properly," the shattering of one's reality is further broken as others do not recognize the broader societal injustice at hand (Farrell 189).

Rat Kiley initially attempts to vocalize his trauma through writing after his friend Curt Lemon is killed. After the event, Rat writes a letter to Curt's sister that is "very personal and touching. Rat almost bawls writing it [and] pours his heart out"; O'Brien even emphasizes that Rat "loved the guy" and that they were "like soul mates" (*The Things* 64-5). Despite this highly exposed and emotional letter, Rat "mails the letter. He waits two months [and] The dumb cooze never writes back" (O'Brien *The Things* 65). Rat Kiley physically reacts to the rejection through "big sad gentle killer eyes," while O'Brien further reiterates his pain and sorrow through Rat's youth. The author states that "He's nineteen years old — it's too much for him" to handle the "incredibly sad" truth that "she never wrote back" (*The Things* 66).

This pain and rejection of listening soon augments from Rat attempting to navigate his own shattered reality to the soldier seeking to destroy another's. Soon after this rejection, Rat discovers a "baby VC water buffalo"; the collective group ropes up the animal, and Rat Kiley attempts to feed the buffalo (O'Brien *The Things* 75). The baby water buffalo rejects Rat's offering, and as a result, the soldier shrugs, steps back, and "sho[ots] it through the right front knee" (O'Brien *The Things* 75). This careful shot was then swiftly followed by the buffalo being shot in the ear, in the hindquarters, its back, and twice in the side in order not to kill, but to provide pain (O'Brien *The Things* 75). Rat's swift aggression highlights the sense of betrayal that he felt in not receiving a reply to his shared trauma, and continues further to demonstrate the danger of falling further into one's augmented reality. Farrell explains that "just as psychoanalysts treating trauma victims warn that the witness must retain his or her own sense of self or risk becoming subsumed in the trauma story, O'Brien shows how the longing to merge

fully with another can turn into a desire to consume or destroy that Other" (193). In the case of Rat Kiley, the aggravated maiming of the water buffalo is presented as not only an outlet for his anger, but also illustrates how he further imbues himself within his trauma experience so much so that he seeks to "consume or destroy" the Other[5]. By placing the psychoanalytic "Otherness" or augmented reality of trauma upon the water buffalo, Rat attempts to fully destroy the other that destroyed Kurt Lemon, and by proxy, his limited view of reality absent of encountering the Real. In placing the Real side by side with the Other, Rat Kiley further pushes himself within his own fractured reality by continually pushing the social limits of the world around him.

Through Rat Kiley finally silencing the water buffalo by shooting it in the throat, the symbolic representation of silencing the voices of Vietnam and the voices of trauma become Rat's attempt to regain control of his quickly spiraling reality. Herman speaks to this symbolism in explaining that when it comes to a feeling of guilt, "the survivor needs the help of others who are willing to recognize that a traumatic event has occurred, to suspend their preconceived judgments, and simply to bear witness to her tale," which is exactly what Curt's sister fails to do (68). Instead of witnessing the written tale of trauma, Rat's platoon surrounds his encounter with the water buffalo and simply witnesses Rat's engagement with trauma. This engagement in addition to the symbolized Other demonstrate the combination of wartime camaraderie and application of empathy; while the platoon did not engage with Rat as he sought to unleash his pain upon another, they simply bore witness and chose to recognize the power of loss within the Vietnam landscape. As a result of this failed listening exchange, O'Brien points to the power of

[5] While psychoanalysis allows for this humanist representation of Otherness to equate the water buffalo, it is important to note that regarding this example, Lacan's theoretical beliefs state that he "reserve[s] for the human alone the capacity to 'respond' rather than simply 'react'" which does not allow for the animal to exist alongside human beings within the same plane (Wolfe 64). By neglecting to acknowledge this water buffalo as a living organism, psychoanalysis does place it outside of the realm of consideration as a being, and when combined with the above O'Brien pages, the presented story results in the animal solely existing as an entity classified and manipulated by the human gaze.

empathy within a space where listening was originally rejected. In choosing to act as a witness, O'Brien ultimately shows the ability for war stories to expand past the core components of Happening Truth and allow sympathetic listeners to listen not just to war stories, but also stories of love (O'Brien *The Things* 81).

Listening and sympathetic listeners have a role within wartime experience that is invaluable and unparalleled. Especially for Vietnam writers such as Tim O'Brien, the act of confession or providing "war testimony are not simply about being absolved of wrongs committed" but they can also act as a way of "sharing responsibility for the war" (Farrell 198). Storytelling exists as a platform where survivors and veterans alike can augment and craft their tales in a way that provides sharing that responsibility while also creating a safe space for processing and healing. Tim O'Brien mentions that while he was unable to describe the war in detail, ever since reentering civilian life, he "had been talking about it virtually nonstop" through writing, so much so that "Telling stories seemed like a natural, inevitable process, like clearing the throat" (O'Brien *The Things* 151). The important note to consider, however, is that "audiences have agency as well" (Phelan 10). Authors and veterans alike may choose to explore their trauma through storytelling, but it is only through listening, and especially reading from an engaged audience that the exchange for growth may be possible. Ultimately, audiences have the choice to engage with a text and choose to energetically and empathetically listen, but true engagement offers the chance for perspectives to grow and tales to be heard; after all, "stories can save us" (O'Brien *The Things* 213).

CHAPTER 4

TRAUMA AND SOCIETY

Thus far, an investigation into the relationship between trauma and storytelling has been grounded within the concepts of trauma, psychoanalytic theory, navigating the truth in spoken and written language, as well as negotiating healing with a sympathetic listener. While all of these concepts relate to the victim of wartime traumas, it is important to take a step back and examine the societal realm in which a soldier bases their experiences; in other words, to examine the expectations of the community that sends soldiers into action. Contrary to the sympathetic listener, discourse examining such reactions of society to wartime veterans often focuses on how the larger community as a whole selectively listens or refuses to listen at all. This then amplifies the pain of a victim remembering and recounting war stories, for their fear is born out of "the reactions the soldiers expect from their neighbors and loved ones" (Pederson 342). As a result, the final chapter of this examination will focus not only on societal expectations for soldiers both before and after war, but also how such experiences are represented within Tim O'Brien's powerful 1994 text, *In the Lake of the Woods*.

Purposeful Forgetting

Regarding the broader societal view of wartime, images of political propaganda may come to mind, as well as how society often portrayed the everyday soldier as a hero. Choosing to serve one's country was deemed courageous and placed the soldier above all else; in reality, however, "numerous men with long-lasting psychiatric disabilities crowded the back wards of veterans' hospitals, [and] their presence had become an embarrassment to civilian societies eager to forget" (Herman 23). Theorists often examine this societal reaction as a form of pre and post

war experience. Before the war, a community would praise and hold those who volunteer in high esteem, whereas once the soldier comes home, their society chooses to not engage or listen to the traumas that their veterans suffered while abroad. Tim O'Brien emphasizes a similar feeling in a video interview with Big Think. Regarding coming home from Vietnam, he mentions that "By and large…the mythology is betrayal. We were betrayed by our government [and] the liberal press" even to the point of stating that "It wasn't our doing, it was their doing" ("What we" :00-36). This "insidious and dangerous side" of the "mythology" surrounding the Vietnam war highlights the juxtaposition between support for soldiers after their ultimate sacrifice. In terms of critics and veterans, these sacrifices for others often go unheard and result in a spiral of traumatic experience for the veteran victim, which circles back to the necessity to have others that can act as sympathetic listeners in order to help veterans take the first step towards healing. One such step exists within written encounters, both fictional and non, where authors are able to try and connect to their audiences in order to relay a version of their war and help paint a picture for the audience that illustrates the difficult life of a soldier abroad.

When applying these feelings of betrayal to literature, critics note that O'Brien's representation of the Vietnam War differs "in that there is never innocence to be lost" (Wesley 9). Essentially, O'Brien does not coat the work of a soldier as society views them — there is no overrepresenation of valor or bravery, or that each sacrifice is necessarily out of patriotic duty. Instead, O'Brien shares with the audience a gritty view of reality where soldiers illustrate their brotherhood with one another and that the violence of war has no filter. This is where a form of miscommunication begins, for as "returning soldiers look for tangible evidence of public recognition" they are instead left with a feeling of "resentment at the general lack of public

awareness, interest, and attention" for they fear that their "sacrifices will be quickly forgotten" (Herman 70).

While Herman believes that there is a fear of forgetting, O'Brien poignantly notes that in his view, a veteran and their experiences are ultimately "all but deleted from American mythology and memory" (Ooms 26). This results in a complication of the healing via storytelling process, for not only is it complicated to find a willing listener/witness, but there is also a new inability for American veterans to be able to share their stories due to "social upheaval at home and the aimless, mine-littered march in Vietnam abroad" (Ooms 26). The combined ideas of healing, storytelling, and personal and social validation through shared traumatic experience becomes impossible due to the inaccuracies between social expectations and traumatic reality. Miller puts forth a call to action because of this, and notes that part of the power in recognizing the trauma of Vietnam is to also recognize that understanding the full picture of Vietnam is impossible in itself (Miller 239). This is where the creative license of literature comes in; while the period of Vietnam war literature is in itself fragmented and chaotic, is is through methods such as Story Truth vs Happening Truth as well as the literary representation of societal divide that an audience of sympathetic listeners/readers can begin to try and peel back the layers that encompass a veteran's Vietnam experience. While a full picture may be impossible, as per Miller, O'Brien begins setting such a scene through his text *In the Lake of the Woods*.

Society and the *Woods*

In the Lake of the Woods is the most recently published of the three texts focused upon within this examination. It also follows a similar textual structure as that of *The Things They Carried* and *Going After Cacciato*. *Woods* focuses on John Wade, a veteran and politician, as he loses his standing within the social eye. Within the story, Wade witnesses the media present his

dark military past to the broader network. As a result of this negative imagery, Wade and his wife take time away from the political world and decide to stay at a cabin at Lake of the Woods in order to recuperate from the negative attention and attempt to rebuild their relationship; however, not long after their stay, Wade wakes up one morning to find his wife missing with himself only having a few clues to be found and a handful of fractured memories. While *Woods* does incorporate a fragmented storyline that also spans across timelines, interwoven throughout these more time-based chapters are installments that highlight evidence to the mystery at hand: John Wade's missing wife. These portions of the text incorporate quotes from imagined interviews, quotes from other seminal theoretical and historical texts, as well as physical artifacts of Wade's past such as medals and pieces for magic tricks. While each of these sections help paint a better understanding of the traumatic history of Wade's life, the interwoven chapters focusing on Wade's failed political career demonstrate the negative and omnipresent influence of societal expectations and how they can go awry in terms of a Veteran coming home.

John Wade initially hinted at the dangerous relationship between a war veteran and society near the beginning of the text. Wade emphasizes that in order to operate within his society, "He would guard his advantage. The secrets would remain secret — the things he'd seen, the things he'd done. He would repair what he could, he would endure" (O'Brien *In the Lake* 46). As readers learn, John Wade was part of the platoon that participated in the Mai Lai massacre, a massacre where US soldiers destroyed a village and killed all men, women, and children. Here, Wade demonstrates that the capacity for society to understand his wartime sacrifices and experiences would counter his perceived image of what a soldier should be: heroic, brave, and an upright citizen. But even in that societal expectation, Wade himself admits that he only went to war for love, "not to hurt or be hurt, not to be a good citizen or a hero or a

moral man…Only to be loved" (O'Brien *In the Lake* 60). In reality, Wade's approach to love aligns closely with O'Brien's; within the author's piece "The Vietnam in Me," he notes a similar concept where he "had come to acknowledge, more or less, the dominant principle of love in my life" and that he has "done bad things for love, bad things to stay loved…[such as] Vietnam" (O'Brien). This idea of seeking to be loved follows along two different tracks; first, the desire to be loved aligns with the social image expectation that to be a soldier is to be a brave, self-sacrificing individual. Following this principle, Wade believed that upon coming home, he would be loved and approved of in a way that was absent from his own familial history. Constantly seeking approval from his disgruntled father, by fighting in Vietnam, Wade would have the chance to try and fulfill his desire for connection by bringing home honor, medals, and the reputation of a hero.

Second, Wade seeking love and not a commendation for bravery reiterates the complicated Vietnam backdrop where according to Ooms, soldiers "have no cause to be brave in the name of; they have nothing to fight for, no line between good and evil, no order" and much of that operates out of a fear regarding what their communities will perceive of them once they come back to the U.S. (31). Wade later admits that he hoped and imagined to win "the love of some secret audience" and that he sometimes "did bad things just to be loved" which falls alongside the absence of order and a clear, definitive cause in terms of what he should be brave for. Additionally, Wade's seeking for love falls alongside Lacanian principles of seeking to fulfill lack; as Wade attempts to gain the approval and love of others he himself is also attempting to complete the void created within himself due to his traumatic encounters with the Real. By recognizing that the world operates in ways that lie contrary to what he expects, Wade is consistently forced to relive his feelings of lack and seek false objects of desire, such as

community success and approval, in order to feel complete again. Ẑiẑek notes this third-party like viewing of trauma through his statement that "*They have eyes that they might not see.* That they might not see what? Precisely, that things are looking at them" (109, author's emphasis). The realization of such outward systems of movement soon result in viewing the government as an agent of compromise, or the third-party viewing system, and one that acts as an omnipresent force ready to strike down social reintegration. For while Wade was busy attempting to complete his own self-deficits as a result of his psychological and physical traumatic experiences, throughout the text, he was constantly shadowed by the invisible weight of societal influence that ultimately hindered his ability to navigate the social system at all.

Tim O'Brien notes that "in many cases a true war story cannot be believed," which then raises the question of why try to tell it (*The Things* 68)? Storytelling, as discussed thus far, offers a very impactful way for veterans and trauma survivors to digest their experiences in a way that allows for language to carry the burden that has been mentally and physically held by victims. Through sharing that language load with others, veterans can begin to heal. The alternate component to this storytelling however, results in society confronting a trauma that is not often recognized. Kaplan notes that when one person's trauma is linked to a social or community sphere, "traumatic events may affect the discourse of an entire nation's public narratives," resulting in a community-like traumatic event (66). In other words, if society chose to listen to the raw accounts of veteran's experiences at war, the broader social belief system would be shattered for its own understanding of the social order would be turned on its head. Instead, this is where the choice to stick to positive soldier associations becomes a protective barrier to the reality of the society O'Brien's characters are living in.

Such a rejection of a soldier's traumatic reality is apparent within *In the Lake of the Woods*. After coming home from Vietnam, John Wade enters the field of politics and begins to climb the ladder to higher government positions. Within one of the timelines of the novel, the audience meets Wade and his wife at the moment his Vietnam past leaks to the media during an election cycle. As they both wait in a hotel room after a campaign event, they see a news release that exposes Wade's participation in the Mai Lai massacre to all those watching. In reaction, Wade notes that:

> One minute you're presidential timber and then they come at you with chain saws. It was textbook slippage. It was dishonor and disgrace. Certain secrets had been betrayed — ambush politics…so the polls went sour and in the press there was snide chatter about issues of character and integrity. Front-page photographs. Dead human beings in awkward poses. By late August the whole enterprise had become unraveled, empty wallets and hedged bets and thinning crowds, old friends with slippery new excuses, and on the first Tuesday after the second Monday in November he was defeated by a margin of something more than 105,000 votes. (O'Brien *In the Lake* 48).

Within this moment, O'Brien pinpoints the divide between social expectation and a soldier's reality. As Wade sought to maintain secrecy for such traumatic events, as his military experiences in the massacre leaked to the media, he immediately was met with 'dishonor and disgrace,' so much so that partnerships and friendships dissolved without an inquiry to the politician himself. Wade notes that "people make assumptions" which can then lead to a slippery slope where assumptions are then presumed as fact, which furthers the divide between reality and expectation (O'Brien *In the Lake* 279). This calls back once again to psychoanalysis. By Wade continually confronting a failed acquisition of desire — love — he continually attempts to

reshape himself through falsely following other attempts to achieve desire and block out his traumatic encounter. Unbeknownst to him, however, Wade still operates under a third-party omnipresent viewer; because the government is always watching and society is often relying on their preconceived notions, Wade is constantly destined to fail no matter how often he tries to patch up the pieces of his traumatic past.

Unfortunately, experiences such as Wade's are not solely tied to the literary realm. Within a published 2019 study on Veteran reintegration into society, participants were interviewed on their reactions to coming home. Two different participants cited a similar feeling of rejection; one exclaimed that they were "ostracized by all of society" while another shared that when they came home, "[the people] threw rocks at me…When I got home, my world was shattered" (Sullivan & Starnino 33). Ẑiẑek connects this feeling of being shattered back into the cyclical nature of desire. They note that the "realization of desire does not consist in its being 'fulfilled,' 'fully satisfied,' it coincides rather with the reproduction of desire as such, with its circular movement" (Ẑiẑek 7). What is diverging within the landscape of reality vs social desire is this very idea of desire, with the difference between the two being what social structures can and can not be faced. While soldiers and veterans seek to navigate this cyclical desire through reintegrating back into society and sharing their stories, society seeks to maintain their satisfactory desire through rejecting what does not line up with their expected image of war. This is where Wade's experience reenters the conversation. As mentioned prior, Wade self-disclosed that he joined the war for love — whether that be to replace the lost love from his home life or to seek the approval of an 'imaginary other.' Through Wade joining in this cyclical attempted desire through first fighting in Vietnam to then his career in politics, he follows Ẑiẑek's statement of not necessarily predicting his desires, but constantly cycling through his desire for love and

acceptance. It is through this realization that the next step from societal expectation to soldier reality can be taken: coping with the void between the two.

Despite the attempt to try and keep secrets, Wade was aware of his mental illness. Within the text, the narrator notes that Wade was aware of his illness, and that when trying to explain it to his wife, he stated that "I don't feel real sometimes. Like I'm not *here*…I can't even look at my own eyes in the mirror, not for long. I'm afraid I won't be there" (O'Brien *In the Lake* 73-4). Wade's confession to Kathy of feeling absent or invisible to his own self aligns with Herman's text, where she notes about the complicated result of prominent PTSD symptoms. Herman exclaims that "because post-traumatic symptoms are so persistent and wide-ranging, they may be mistaken for enduring characteristics of the victim's personality" which left unrecognized or untreated, results in an individual having a "diminished life, tormented by memory and bounded by helplessness and fear" (49). Wade's lost sense of self points to not only the effect of trauma on his sense of self (or within Lacan's view his perceived place in the world), but also that his attempt to suppress his illness became part of his new identity. Wade tried to keep his wartime experiences under lock-and-key, which then resulted in Wade creating a new image in the form of a reserved, yet powerful politician. This false persona born out of managing trauma symptoms is what allowed him to successfully climb the social ladder before experiencing the crash and fall of the Mai Lai media scandal.

Now seen as "Ex-sorcerer. Ex-candidate for the United States Senate…[and] now a poor hung-over putz without a trick in his bag," the listening audience of this text begins to notice a more drastic shift in attempting to control the traumatic "horror" that circled Wade's mind (O'Brien *In the Lake* 188, 214). Wade initially experienced both society's expectations of warfare, his own diverging experience of soldier life, and now has experienced the rift between

the two. Such a drastic shift in identity and worldview then leads Wade to another attempted way to try and cope with the stress of society rejecting the trauma one has experienced: erasure. Kaplan asks "Does an entire nation forget? Or only the perpetrators?" in order to try and control the discourse of warfare, but within this instance, the audience sees another layer of desperation for Wade in that he himself tries to forget all aspects of warfare (66). Feeding into the suggested governmental and community control over the perception of warfare and soldier sacrifice, Wade soon seeks two extremes in order to try and help process his trauma despite having no willing listener.

Within her text, Kaplan notes the power of a shattered perception of self; she states that "The destruction of the symbolic order within which people live and can make sense of their lives can have devastating results," (Kaplan 67). The symbolic order, especially within Lacan's view, operates as the realm where people are able to utilize language to convey needs and desires, and where people are often beginning their search for completeness via fulfilling a sense of lack brought upon by that very introduction to language. Here, Kaplan references the power in breaking apart the realm of language and communication, for everything in an individual's life then becomes fragmented — not unlike the very experience of the Vietnam war. Wade within *In the Lake of the Woods* reiterates such symbolic pain in the recurring traumatic memory of Mai Lai. In regards to memory, Wade somberly notes that "In the months ahead, [he] would remember Thuan Yen the way chemical nightmares are remembered, impossible combinations, impossible events, and over time the impossibility itself would become the richest…profound memory. This could not have happened, so it did not" (O'Brien *In the Lake* 109). Here, Wade tries to use language in order to describe the profound impact that wartime trauma has instilled, but as similarly noted by trauma theorists such as Caruth and Herman, the ability to apply

language to trauma is nearly impossible. This is where Wade shifts to a denial of his trauma and attempts the coping method of forgetting.

In regards to forgetting, Wade noted that it "mostly worked" but that it still recurred some nights where he could "remember covering his head and screaming and crawling into a hedgerow" as he did back in Vietnam (O'Brien *In the Lake* 109). This process of forgetting is not uncommon, for according to Herman, if there is no strong political or humanitarian push to recognize war trauma and help develop healing methods, an "active process of forgetting" becomes instilled within the community (9). Forgetting, however, is "not always innocent" (Kaplan 68). Especially in regards to the protagonist Wade, his forgetting created a two part augmentation of his illness post-Vietnam. Within the governmental sphere, his inability to have others listen leads to him choosing not to share his story, which creates a "forgetting" of his past that comes back to haunt him via the media. Within the personal sphere, forgetting his time serving in Vietnam led to not only relationship difficulties with his wife, but he was also unable to take the next steps towards healing despite admitting to having an illness. This failure to truly erase his trauma then leaves Wade "forever stuck in the slime of My Lai's ditch" where the ditch then becomes a symbol of his current life (Kowalczuk 5). He is attempting to conceal his trauma symptoms, but in reality, he is trapped within the third-eye viewing party as referenced by Ẑiẑek, where Wade's attempted hiding through erasure actually places him directly within the eye of his surrounding community. This placement then leads Wade to the creation of "sub-memories" that are spawned from the realm of the Real itself: they are "beneath the waking world, deeper than dream…[they were] beyond remembering. It was knowing" (O'Brien *In the Lake* 132).

This recognition of the amorphous sub-memories from the Real then leads Wade to his final attempt at forgetting, where he tries to "remake himself, to vanish what was past and

replace it with things good and new" (O'Brien *In the Lake* 234). In order to try and fully separate himself from his company, Wade retyped, cut, and removed his name from all Charlie Company documents in order to help "ease the guilt," and instead, added his name to Alpha Company in order to create a final, "logical" separation from his trauma (O'Brien *In the Lake* 269). Ẑiẑek reshapes this example of Wade's removal through the lens of nostalgia. He notes that nostalgia creates this illusion of "seeing ourselves seeing," but in reality, we are unaware "to the fact that the other is already gazing at us" (114). By removing his name from formal military records, Wade attempted to remove himself from a history of trauma in the public eye, but in reality, the social gaze already dismantled the potential for erasure. In seeking a form of identity nostalgia, Wade becomes blind to the fact that he cannot remove his trauma and wartime experience like how he removed his name from a piece of paper. Instead, he had to "carry the burdens, [and] entomb [him]self in silence" as a way to maintain his grip on his identity, despite his grip on the physical, material world "being loosened" (O'Brien *In the Lake* 241, 281).

This depiction of a veteran attempting to navigate their trauma once more, and finally, points to the need for societal recognition of trauma and for willing sympathetic listeners. In order to create an alliance between veteran/victim and a listener/witness, familial relationships and broader context for social and political movements can "give voice to the disempowered" and create the opportunity for progress (Herman 9). Writing allows for such conversations to begin. While only three of O'Brien's texts were focused upon for this investigation, "many of O'Brien's characters return home to people who never listen, and the effects of that barrier between veteran and audience are often tragic" (Ooms 40). O'Brien continues his raw, fragmented representation of Story Truth and War Truth within the lens of the Veteran at home and directly speaks to the audience as a way to begin not only sharing a trauma narrative, but

also to begin the conversation of where veteran support went wrong. For as O'Brien paints an unfortunate picture of a veteran trying to navigate life and trauma, he can't help but throw the image back at the audience and close with a powerful, dynamic question: "Can we believe that he was not a monster, but a man?" (O'Brien *In the Lake* 33).

CONCLUSION

BRINGING BACK A VANISHED LIFE

Trauma and each individual's traumatic encounters are diverse; as stated within Chapter One, the impact of the same trauma upon different individuals can create a variety of reactions, for each person has their own background, history, and attributes that make them who they are. One of the only common denominators, however, is the idea of repetition. Forter notes that the human predicament is only "known" by repeating, which is a result of "our common linguistic condition: through our talking and listening, our reading and writing — in short, our very being-in-language" (282). This commonality ties back to Lacan's tri-part psychoanalytic theory, for the Symbolic Order operates as the phase where language is introduced and becomes the currency for wants and desires, while also creating the rift in prior self understanding. Expanding upon this principle, by creating repetition in language, the very substance that allows an individual to join the social sphere, victims of trauma have the chance to display their traumatic truths through storytelling. It is this very truth that allows for the capacity to help shift the mold of social expectation while also allowing the space for one's first steps towards healing and comprehending trauma.

Storytelling allows for a combination of truth and imagination which then becomes "an 'inherently life affirming' act…which symbolizes the unfathomable" (Kowalczuk 8). As seen within Tim O'Brien's texts *Going After Cacciato*, *The Things They Carried*, and *In the Lake of the Woods*, characters encounter repetitive traumatic experiences while serving their time in Vietnam and are also attempting to understand their trauma via storytelling. Whether it is the case of Paul Berlin and his imagined tales of Going to Paris, Rat Kiley and his letter writing, or

John Wade and his attempted erasure of experience, the storytelling seen within this particular arc of works illustrate the vast and varying successes of sharing one's story, and that those images of success ultimately depend on the participation of empathetic listeners and readers.

Part of what makes these stories powerful is the way O'Brien navigates his relationship with the authorial role through his own storytelling. Homer augments this idea via Lacan's concept of transference in regards to literature. Homer notes that the "complex encounter between reader and text" takes place in an artificial, symbolic space that operates in tandem with desire and language (124). This space is then further complicated by audience motivation, a "love of literature" that becomes integrated into a reader's encounter with the text. Through O'Brien navigating this realm of audience relationship alongside his balance of Story Truth and real-life experiences, he points to another reason that storytelling is so powerful. Within an interview with Big Think, O'Brien states that literature can be a powerful vessel for change and idea sharing, for "it really touches individual people and real lives and the real world and…[it] contributes to their lives [and] it does something to their lives" ("Tim" 3:19-35). This very act of writing aligns with the role of a sympathetic listener or story witness; essentially, as a verbal story can create an influential shift to a listener's ear, so too can literature within the triangular relationship of author-text-reader. By creating the space for readers to empathetically connect and grow alongside the veteran story being told, O'Brien demonstrates that readers can ultimately act as listeners too, and that healing connections can form within a diverse literary audience.

Complicating the aforementioned triangular relationship above is the ability to decipher and illustrate the trauma of Vietnam despite its fragmented and dissociated nature. Caruth notes that part of the recurring haunting that trauma does to its victims is the reality "of the way that its

violence has not yet been fully known" (6). This can be seen within each of O'Brien's characters, particularly John Wade, where while the characters themselves may be aware of their illness, the true scope of encountering the Real and facing traumatic events cannot always be known. O'Brien attempts to help resolve this component through the act of storytelling, where once a story is told and comes to a conclusion, much like the author's texts, the traumatic experience can "truly belon[g] to the past" (Herman 195). Housed within the pages of a text, the ability for a traumatic tale to be shaped through a variety of literary devices, metaphors, and storylines demonstrates the possibility for traumatic storytelling to be as dynamic and diverse as the victims themselves. Because O'Brien was able to uniquely create storylines of trauma and pain, yet present a variety of attempted points of healing, he demonstrates that literature is able to access trauma, and thus "deliver reality in its truest form," (Pederson 350). Or in other words, literature is able to capture a sense of reality that speech cannot (Pederson 345).

Ultimately, and as showcased by Tim O'Brien, literature is able to assist authors in comprehending wartime trauma through the retelling of their traumatic events. By utilizing language and thematic components of writing, veterans such as O'Brien are able to navigate their "open wound" of trauma and demonstrate to themselves, as well as the audience, how one is "learning to mourn what happened, bear witness to it, and yet move forward" (Kaplan 147). Within *In Lake of the Woods*, O'Brien briefly commented within a footnote that perhaps this text was meant "to remind me. To give me back my vanished life" (298). Literature in all forms — whether a formal text or informal memory — creates the opportunity for others to heal and to "feel a little less alone in the world" and helps others know that they are not alone; even in moments of darkest sorrow and recurring memory, "Literature does touch people" ("Tim" 3:50 - 4:12).

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