Unraveling the deeper meaning: exile and the embodied poetics of displacement in Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*

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By Tina Chen

Tim O’Brien’s collection of short stories ‘The Things They Carried’ portrays the Vietnam War as a psychic trauma without the glamour typical of postmodernism. The stories emphasize the contradictions inherent in war, such as the subversion of the moral code and the flexibility of the truth. O’Brien uses war to address the world’s complexity and lack of definitive concepts.

Tim O’Brien is obsessed with telling a true war story. Truth, O’Brien’s fiction about the Vietnam experience suggests, lies not in realistic depictions or definitive accounts. As O’Brien argues, “[a]bsolute occurrence is irrelevant” because “a true war story does not depend upon that kind of truth” (Things 89). Committed to examining the relationship between the concrete and the imagined, O’Brien dismantles binaristic notions of “happening-truth” and story-truth: “A thing may happen and be a total be; another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth” (89). In order to assess whether he has written fiction that is “truer than the truth,” O’Brien singles out the type of reaction his stories should provoke: “It comes down to gut instinct. A true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe” (84). This emphasis on the body’s visceral response to fiction aptly encapsulates O’Brien’s investigation of the literal and metaphoric relationships between stories and bodies, particularly as such affiliations are forged by a psychology of exile and displacement. For O’Brien, the returning veteran’s paradoxical desires—a yearning to reverse the unwilling transformations conjured by combat experience; the inexplicable sense of exile that troubles any possibility of an easy return or rest—are best expressed by how a true war story “never seems to end” (83) but can only be told and retold, different each time yet no less faithful to the truths it must convey.

O’Brien’s compulsion to revisit his war experience through fiction is not unique. The moral ambiguity and unresolved conflicts characterizing U.S. involvement in Vietnam have made that war a compelling presence in the American literary and cultural imagination.(1) Vietnam did more than redefine the mythos of war. According to John Hellmann, it provoked a crisis in the very narrative of nation:

Americans entered Vietnam with certain expectations that a story, a distinctly American story, would unfold. When the story of America in Vietnam turned into something unexpected, the true nature of the larger story of America itself became the subject of intense cultural dispute. On the deepest level, the legacy of Vietnam is the disruption of our story, of our explanation of the past and vision of the future. (x)(2)

If the Vietnam War has been figured as a “disruption” of America’s self-narration as nation, its rupturing of “our story” has none of the glamour or play that characterizes postmodernism. Rather, it has been cast as psychic trauma, a metaphysical fracture in the body politic that refuses to heal completely.

For O’Brien, the lingering hurts of the war are intimately linked to his stories, which, by virtue of their allegiance to the contradictory truths of war, resist closure. *The Things They Carried*, a collection of related short stories that appears grounded in O’Brien’s own “real” combat experience even as it insists upon war as an endless fiction, ponders the complexities of such connections.(3) Written as a series of quasi-memoiristic episodes, the book questions the nature of truth and the possibility of ever having an unchallenged “sense of the definite” (88). Directing readers beyond the stories to the narrative gaps within and between them, O’Brien renders the indescribable experiences of “Vietnam” as moments one may gesture to but never fully represent. After Vietnam, it becomes impossible to “ten where you are, or why you’re there, and the only certainty is overwhelming ambiguity.” O’Brien’s war stories, which are ultimately “never about war,” reflect the difficult choices forced upon those who have confronted the contradictions of combat: “There is no clarity. Everything swirls. The old rules are no longer binding, the old truths no longer true. Right spills over into wrong. Order blends into chaos, love into hate, ugliness into beauty, law into anarchy, civility into savagery” (88).

The disorder of a world without rules underlies O’Brien’s problematizing of the boundaries between personal memory and official history. O’Brien’s vexed preoccupation with the disjunctures that make history unreliable and memory the condition for narrative is engendered by the impossibility of ever achieving an unproblematic return home—whether that return is to family, community, one’s prewar subjectivity, or nation. As such, the stories in *The Things They Carried* reflect the rootless existence of an exile. Marked by a complex understanding of Vietnam and its indelible consequences, the stories demonstrate a preoccupation with the nature of displacement and alienation. While much critical attention has been directed to the idea of the Vietnam veteran who feels exiled from America, O’Brien’s work demands a reconceptualization of exile: O’Brien is alienated from his nation, his friends, himself, and, however counterintuitively, Vietnam.(4) Although O’Brien’s fictive project centers on the impossibility of ascertaining any one “truth” from the experience of war, Things is guided nonetheless by an impulse to tell the truth, “though the truth is ugly” (87). And the ugliness of the truth that Tim O’Brien tells, an ugliness paradoxically sublime in its “largeness” and “godliness,” deals much more with perpetual unmooring than it does with any kind of resolution. Exile as a fluid and inescapable experience resulting from immersion in the moral ambiguity of the Vietnam War inflects all aspects of the stories in Things.

Exile in *The Things They Carried* is rendered as a multiply located mode of experience; it is a condition both singular and plural in its manifestations. What begins as a fear of exile from a centrally located home, a site firmly identified as the plains of Minnesota, proliferates into multiply situated points of exile upon returning from the war. As a careful reading of Things reveals, O’Brien’s war stories are not about recovering from trauma or resolving the conflicts contributing to or created by the war in any permanent way; they are about accepting indeterminacy and learning to live not through Vietnam but with it. In a 1991 interview with Steven Kaplan, O’Brien admits: “My concerns as a human being and my concerns as an artist have at some point intersected in Vietnam—not just in the physical place, but in the
spiritual and moral terrain of Vietnam... There was an intersection of values, of what was and what was to come, that I'll always go back to,” even though the stories “are almost all invented, even the Vietnam stuff” (101, 95). This conscious, deeply intentional reconstruction of Vietnam invokes Salman Rushdie’s concept of “homeland” as one which, for the exiled writer, is always already fictive in nature: “if we do look back, we must... do so in the knowledge—which gives rise to profound uncertainties—that our physical alienation ... almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands” (10). Rushdie’s eloquent articulation of an imaginary homeland recognizes the intimate relationship between an exilic longing and storytelling. O’Brien perceives such a connection occurring when “remembering is turned into a kind of rehappening” (36). His contested “confession” to killing someone during the war in “Good Form” testifies to the curious relationship between the stories and the idea of return, where each sustains and makes possible the other: (5)

Here is the happening-truth. I was once a soldier. There were many bodies, real bodies with real faces, but I was young then and I was afraid to look. And now, twenty years later, I’m left with faceless responsibility and faceless grief.

Here is the story-truth. He was a slim, dead, almost dainty young man of about twenty. He lay in the center of a red day trail near the village of My Khe. His jaw was in his throat. His one eye was shut, the other one was a star shaped hole. I killed him.

What stories can do, I guess, is make things present. I can look at things I never looked at. I can attach faces to grief and love and pity and God. I can be brave. I can make myself feel again. (203-4)

For O’Brien, the epistemology of displacement, mediated by the limitations and possibilities of his stories, registers on multiple levels: geographical, temporal, narrative, social, even moral. Although O’Brien’s concept of displacement is predicated upon the impossibility of any permanent return, his work nonetheless insists upon multiple returns, however fleeting or unstable, to the imaginative landscape of Vietnam. These returns produce the stories, which in turn demand the acknowledgment of Vietnam as the central topos and creative core of the fiction. Vietnam exists as both place of estrangement and ironic homeland, a fictive geography acting synchronically as point of return and alienation. Alienation becomes a state of desire producing the stories. Return is figured as momentarily possible, a juncture of time, space, and desire that never offers a definitive resting place.

In his prize-winning Going After Cacciato, O’Brien posits a traditional conception of exile as separation from native community. Near the end of Cacciato, the protagonist, Paul Berlin, dreams himself at the Paris peace talks and identifies the Berlin, dreams himself at the Paris peace talks and identifies the intersection of values, of what was and what was to come, that I’ll always go back to,” even though the stories “are almost all invented, even the Vietnam stuff” (101, 95). This conscious, deeply intentional reconstruction of Vietnam invokes Salman Rushdie’s concept of “homeland” as one which, for the exiled writer, is always already fictive in nature: “if we do look back, we must... do so in the knowledge—which gives rise to profound uncertainties—that our physical alienation ... almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands” (10). Rushdie’s eloquent articulation of an imaginary homeland recognizes the intimate relationship between an exilic longing and storytelling. O’Brien perceives such a connection occurring when “remembering is turned into a kind of rehappening” (36). His contested “confession” to killing someone during the war in “Good Form” testifies to the curious relationship between the stories and the idea of return, where each sustains and makes possible the other: (5)

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metonymy, even while substituting one term for another, also insistently engages and provokes the recognition of a lack, the replacing term only partially signifying the replaced term. The space of signification left unfilled by the supplantation then acts to destabilize equivalence and subrogation. In Things, Vietnam is figured metonymically by the bodies in the text as well as the stories themselves. Both bodies and stories act as substitute terms for Vietnam; the meanings circulating among the three figures continually cross and recross categories of signification, so that it becomes impossible to discuss one term without referring and relating to the other two. Thus the densely reticulated relationship between O'Brien's consciousness of displacement and its orientation toward Vietnam reveals itself as an organic and integral part of the book.

Of critical importance to O'Brien's examination of displacement in *The Things They Carried* is the potential of home to act as a site producing multiple ways of structuring consciousness. The necessity of redesignating home as a generative location collides with figurations of the metonymic relationship between body and place in the title story, which traces Lieutenant Jimmy Cross's crush on Martha, "a junior at Mount Sebastian College in New Jersey" (3). Mesmerized by fantasies of Martha while partially cognizant of his self-willed delusions about herrequiting his love, Lieutenant Cross cultivates within himself an exilic consciousness that continually returns to the idea and image of home as it is embodied in Martha. Martha represents more than the idea of home; she actually figures as a metonym for home and all its attendant images. When Lieutenant Cross receives a good-luck charm from her, it is a pebble:

Smooth to the touch, it was a milky white color with flecks of orange and violet, oval-shaped, like a miniature egg. In the accompanying letter, Martha wrote that she had found the pebble on the Jersey shoreline, precisely where the land touched water at high tide, where things came together but also separated. It was this separate-but-together quality, she wrote, that had inspired her to pick up the pebble and to carry it in her breast pocket for several days, where it seemed weightless, and then to send it through the mail, by air, as a token of her truest feelings for him (9).

Just as the pebble acts as a metonym for the Jersey shoreline (and, by extension, America), Martha’s explanation of how she carries the pebble with her and finally sends it to Lieutenant Cross as a “token of her truest feelings” works to figure the pebble as a metonym for her. Cross actualizes this figural relationship when he “carried[s] the pebble in his mouth” and imagines that it is her tongue (9). Constructing his fictions on a nightly basis, he “spends[s] the last hour of light pretending [...] and imagin[ing] romantic camping trips into the White Mountains in New Hampshire” (3). Despite the comforting and romantic nature of his fantasies, Cross’s exilic daydreams return him to a center and a home that is depicted as static and lacking in generative potential. Cross’s imaginative returns home, to Martha and the Jersey shoreline, to America, always result in the same stories. His romantic fantasies are pitifully inadequate in the face of the ambiguous and dangerous realities of combat duty in Vietnam. Moments before Ted Lavender, a doped-up, sleepy-eyed member of Alpha Company, is shot while “on his way back from peeing,” Lieutenant Cross is “not there” because he was buried with Martha under the white sand at the Jersey shore. They were pressed together, and the pebble in his mouth was her tongue. He was smiling. Vaguely, he was aware of how quiet the day was, the sullen paddies, yet he could not bring himself to worry about matters of security. (12-13)

The subsequent death of Ted Lavender jolts him into awareness, forcing the realization that the romantic fantasies produced by an exilic consciousness longing to return home to America are unable to meet the exigencies of combat experience in Vietnam. This perception leads Lieutenant Cross to bum his pictures of Martha, steeling himself with the thought that “[t]his was not Mount Sebastian, it was another world, where there were no pretty poems or midterm exams, a place where men died because of carelessness and gross stupidity” (23-24).

Although Worthington, Minnesota is represented by the narrator as “everything that mattered to me” in “On the Rainy River,” it, too, lacks a certain ability to engender the new ways of reading and writing the world crucial to the consciousness of O'Brien's fiction. His hometow..."a conservative little spot on the prairie"—exemplifies a “blind, thoughtless, automatic acquiescence” that results in “a kind of schizophrenia” (48). When a draft notice forces the narrator to make a choice between fighting a war he believes is wrong or facing the public censure a refusal to fight would provoke, he finds no alternative perspectives in the town to help him in his decision. For all of the “polyestered Kiwanis boys, the merchants and farmers, the pious churchgoers, the chatty housewives, the PTA and the Lions club and the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the fine upstanding gentry out at the country club,” war and the decision to fight are matters of utmost simplicity: “it was a war to stop the Communists, plain and simple, which was how they liked things, and you were a treasonous pussy if you had second thoughts about killing or dying for plain and simple reasons” (48-49). The clearly demarcated categories of right and wrong paint over difficult moral choices with a “simple-minded patriotism” and “prideful ignorance” (48). Ironically, his fears of being exiled from his community force the narrator into fighting the war because he “was embarrassed not to,” an act which, in turn, alters his notion of exile to the point where he understands that the constant alienation of displacement cannot be eradicated by any journey—whether of escape or return—instead proves to be his very destination.(7)

To deconstruct the ways in which O'Brien articulates the processual and insistently experimental reality of displacement requires a close examination of how he uses both the human body and the art of storytelling as metonyms for Vietnam. In stories about war, bodies—whether whole or in pieces, alive or dead—figure prominently. The Vietnam War spawned a host of disfigurations, deformations of both body and spirit. Men who shipped over to help “stop the Communists, plain and simple,” became avid collectors of Vietcong body parts after experiencing psychological transformations that were anything but simple.(8) The focus on the materiality of the body emerges as an organic expression of the war. In *The Things They Carried*, the rhetorical relationship between bodies and Vietnam works metaphorically as well as metonymically. In “Night Life,” a story about night patrol and Rat Kiley's decision to shoot himself in the foot in order to escape the war, Vietnam is personified as a corporeal entity:

All around you, everywhere, the whole dark countryside came alive. You'd hear a strange hum in your ears.... Like the night had its own voice— that hum in your ears—and in the hours after midnight you'd swear you were walking through some kind of soft black protoplasm, Vietnam, the blood and the flesh. (249)

Depicted as a living organism, “the blood and the flesh” of Vietnam suggests instant connections to the other corporeal entities inhabiting the spaces of the text. However, while Vietnam is marked by its incredible vitality, many of the bodies in Things are not alive—at least not at first. As O'Brien makes clear, they are animated by stories, and by desire.

O'Brien makes an important distinction between fife and the body: “Inside the body, or beyond the body, there is something
absolute and unchanging” (265). Just as the vitality of Vietnam inspires the stories O’Brien has to tell, it is the death of the human body that generates his fiction: “in a story, which is a kind of dreaming, the dead sometimes smile and sit up and return to the world” (255). It is precisely because of the desire to “keep the dead alive” that the stories are created (267). As such, bodies and the imaginative landscape of Vietnam work in concert to impel the stories and direct the consciousness of displacement.

The story that does the collection, “The Lives of the Dead,” begins with a recitation of the bodies littering the text. The list is both a catalog and a litany of the dead:

I’m forty-three years old, and a writer now, and even still, right here, I keep dreaming Linda alive. And Ted Lavender, too, and Kiowa, and Curt Lemon, and a slim young man I killed, and an old man sprawled beside a pigpen, and several others whose bodies I once lifted and dumped into a truck. They’re all dead. (255)

By naming the dead, O’Brien’s narrative persona acknowledges the inanimate bodies that animate—and, in turn, are animated by—his text(s). Even more important than the actual naming of bodies is the materiality of the body itself, its ability to transform itself into an occasion. By delineating with special care the textures and details of the human body, O’Brien forces the reader to an awareness of how physical particularities assume a metaphysical importance. When Curt Lemon steps on a rigged 105 round and dies while playing a game of chicken with smoke grenades, we are told, with details at once grisly and compelling, about Curt Lemon’s individual body parts and how they are blown into a tree. Ordered to “peel him off,” the narrator remembers “the white bone of an arm ... pieces of skin and something wet and yellow that must’ve been the intestines” (89). The dismembered body evokes O’Brien’s own narrative project, which goes about the job of remembering Curt Lemon as it remembers him for that brief moment before the booby-trapped round explodes.

Detailing the bodies in the text(s) allows O’Brien a concrete way of approaching the ambiguous situations of which he writes. The close attention to the death and transformation of the body lays bare the paradox that characterizes any recounting of the war, emphasizing the very real horror of death even while elevating it into an aesthetic moment. The messiness of bodies, especially in death and metamorphosis, promotes a profound irony: the gruesomeness of the Vietnam experience beckons with an almost overwhelming attraction.

Just as the mutilation and dismemberment of enemy bodies during wartime signifies more than a simple taking apart of bodies, instead denoting a powerful fear and desire to deny the enemy a sense of shared humanity, so O’Brien’s focus on the details of the bodies in his text moves beyond the actual bodies to talk about something else. Vietnam, the quiescently generative world” (255). It is precisely because of the desire to “keep the dead alive” that the stories are created (267). As such, bodies and the imaginative landscape of Vietnam work in concert to impel the stories and direct the consciousness of displacement.

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Not necessarily three kids, she’d say. Not necessarily a house on Lake Erie. “Naturally we’ll still get married,” she’d tell him, “but it doesn’t have to be right away. Maybe travel first. Maybe live together. Just test it out, you know?” (110)

Physical changes parallel Mary Anne’s shift away from America and her embrace of Vietnam. She falls “into the habits of the bush, and Mark thinks uncomfortably that “[h]er body seemed foreign somehow—too stiff in places, too firm where the softness used to be” (110). When she begins disappearing with the “Greenies” and taking part in night ambushes, she melts into “a small, soft shadow” (115). Rat Kiley notes, “[w]hen she came in through the wire that night, I was right there, I saw those eyes of hers, I saw how she wasn’t even the same person no more” (116-17). The substantive difference impressed upon her body speaks to how meaning inheres in the corporeal, which figures metonymically both itself and the jarring awareness of another figural relationship. Mary Anne becomes other than Mary Anne, how meaning inheres in the corporeal, which figures metonymically both itself and the jarring awareness of another figural relationship. Mary Anne becomes other than Mary Anne, turning instead into some new, unidentifiable entity who simultaneously registers displacement and substitution through her physical transubstantiation into the imaginative landscape of Vietnam.

Mary Anne’s metamorphosis stems directly from her relationship with the land; her fascination with “the mountains, the mean little villages, the trails and trees and rivers and deep misted-over valleys” (121) permeates her system until she not only figures Vietnam but actually becomes Vietnam:

Sometimes I want to eat this place. Vietnam. I want to swallow the whole country—the dirt, the death—I just want to eat it and have it there inside me. That’s how I feel. It’s like ... this appetite.... When I’m out there at night, I feel close to my own body, I can feel my blood moving, my skin and my
fingernails, everything, it's like I'm full of electricity and I'm glowing in the dark—I'm on fire almost—I'm burning away into nothing—but it doesn't matter because I know exactly who I am. (121)

Mary Anne's desire to incorporate Vietnam, through ingestion, into herself is ironically contingent upon her own willingness to be consumed, "burning away into nothing." Her internalization of the land and the subordination of the geography to her appetite records, on a narrative level, the actual metonymic relationship O'Brien constructs between the figure of the body and the figuration of Vietnam as homeland, the place from which the stories emerge. At the end of the story, the identification of Mary Anne with Vietnam and all its possibilities is complete. The conjoined voices of Rat Kiley and the narrative persona of Tim O'Brien explicate the phenomenon chorically:

For Mary Anne Bell, it seemed, Vietnam had the effect of a powerful drug: that mix of unnamed terror and unnamed pleasure that comes as the needle slips in and you know you're risking something... you become intimate with danger; you're in touch with the far side of yourself, as though it's another hemisphere, and you want to string it out and go wherever the trip takes you and be host to all the possibilities inside yourself. (123-24)

It becomes impossible to distinguish between Mary Anne and Vietnam. As woman and land merge, their fusion complicates easy categorical distinctions. Both are alive with possibilities and imbued with the capacity to signify beyond themselves. Mary Anne becomes more than a simple high schooler from Cleveland Heights, Vietnam infinitely more than a small country at the margins of American consciousness.

The female body, originally invested with the responsibility of signifying the comfort and ease associated with romanticized and nostalgic constructions of domesticity and home, instead becomes a way of talking about the disorienting power of Vietnam. The darker elements of the war bleed across boundaries between home and exile, transfusing themselves into a new construct of home-as-displacement, the only construct capable of generating the stories. The last image of Mary Anne captures this new formation perfectly. She slips away from the compound to roam the country, and all that is left are the stories:

when the Greenies were out on ambush, the whole rain forest seemed to stare in at them--a watched feeling--and a couple of times they almost saw her sliding through the shadows. Not quite, but almost. She had crossed to the other side. She was part of the land. She was wearing her culottes, her pink sweater, and a necklace of human tongue. She was dangerous. She was ready for the kill. (125)

In the fusion of the land and the woman, Vietnam is figured as the home to which the displaced consciousness of the text returns. The spiritual and emotional terrain of Vietnam begets the storytelling. Figured by Mary Anne, the storytelling possibilities lurking in the shadows are made manifest. The attention to her bodily representation of Vietnam returns the exilic consciousness of the text to its truest center.

"Speaking of Courage," another story exploring the correlation between Vietnam and the body, also depicts the conjunction of place and body, but in a much more literal way. Part of a trilogy of stories about the death of Kiowa, who dies after getting shot in a "shit field" when the Song Tra Bong River floods its banks during a heavy rain, "Speaking of Courage" describes Kiowa being sucked into the field during a VC attack: "Kiowa was almost completely under. There was a knee. There was an arm and a gold wristwatch and part of a boot.... There were bubbles where Kiowa's head should've been" story builds off of the metonymic substitutions of bodies for Vietnam in "The Things They Carried" and "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong," literalizing the connection. Kiowa not only dies in Vietnam; he is incorporated into the texture of the land: "Kiowa was gone. He was under the mud and water, folded in with the war" (185). Kiowa's death actually makes him part of the shit field, "folded in" with not just the war but the land itself. Kiowa's literal incorporation into the land proves significant for a later discussion of the narrator's own feelings of alienation and separation from Vietnam.

In "The Ghost Soldiers," O'Brien's narrative persona, after being wounded twice in combat, is transferred to Headquarters Company--S-4, the battalion supply section. The world of 54 is completely different from that of Alpha Company: "Compared with the boonies it was cushy duty. We had regular hours. There was an EM club with beer and movies, sometimes even live floor shows" (219). It is a relatively "safe" way to spend time in Vietnam, but when his former comrades in Alpha Company come in for stand-down, O'Brien realizes that he is no longer a member of their fraternity. The solidarity forged between the members of the company by combat experience, the experience enabling the disparate members of a unit to become a "tribe" and "share the same blood" (220), now works to exclude him, exile him:

In a way, I envied... all of them.... They were still my buddies, at least on one level, but once you leave the boonies, the whole comrade business gets turned around. You become a civilian. You forfeit membership in the family, the blood fraternity, and no matter how hard you try, you can't pretend to be part of it. (221)

Here, the narrator's sense of alienation and exile stems from his separation from his platoon. The platoon, figured as a "blood fraternity," is a body from which the narrator is metaphorically amputated. Such an amputation, already painful in light of his earlier injuries, is rendered even more excruciating by the fact that his former comrades do not view Bobby Jorgenson, the inexperienced medic partially responsible for causing his condition, as he does. Mitchell Sanders informs the narrator that while "[t]he kid messed up bad, for sure[,] ... people change. Situations change. I hate to say this, man, but you're out of touch. Jorgenson--he's with us now" (224-25).

Significantly, the narrator's displaced status registers not simply on a figurative level. His distinction from the rest of the company is marked bodily as well: "Their deep bush tans, the sores and blisters, the stories, the in-it-togetherness. I felt close to them, yes, but I also felt a new sense of separation. My fatigue were starched; I had a neat haircut and the clean, sterile smell of the in-hospitality" (225). In "Speaking of Separation," the narrator finds himself pushed ever further outside the configurations of belonging. Thus the remembering of the dead like Kiowa, who are figured as part of Vietnam itself, establishes an identificatory chain of relation, and it becomes clear that O'Brien's displaced consciousness is oriented toward Vietnam and the brotherhood that it begins to represent. No longer comfortable as a "civilian," he endures the constant sense of loss and alienation characterizing the psychology of the exile. When considered also in the context already established for home--that it act as the orienting place from which stories emerge--the displacement O'Brien experiences stems from his inability to access the ways in which Vietnam acts as both home and land, site of desired return and creative potential. O'Brien's envy and desire are directed toward the stories which only a reorientation to Vietnam can effect. The desire evinced by the feelings of loss which separation entails directs itself insistently back toward an imagined home represented by Vietnam, the point of origin for the displaced consciousness that determines the trajectory of The Things They Carried.
More than a collection of stories, *The Things They Carried* is a book about the need to tell stories, the ways to tell stories, and the reasons for telling stories. When considered within the framework of exile and displacement, stories invest alienation with a purpose and a direction, even if the knowledge that there can never be a final resting place or point of return renders the experience of displacement a teleological end in itself. The stories serve a double function; they not only redeem the experience of displacement but also, like the bodies discussed earlier, figure as metonymic substitutions for the idea of Vietnam as home. As with so many of the ideas in this work, the connections between the terms are densely reticulated, bound together by a series of sequential substitutions so that it becomes impossible to talk about one figure without invoking the ghostly images of others. O’Brien names the stories as “the real obsession” in “Spin” (38), but in “How to Tell a True War Story,” the stories, like the bodies, become metonyms for Vietnam. When Mitchell Sanders tries to talk about the eerie experience a six-man patrol undergoes during a listening-post operation, he imbues Vietnam with a polyvocality which then generates his own story. According to Sanders, the men on patrol hear

All these different voices. Not human voices, though. Because it’s the mountains. Follow me? The rock—it’s talking. And the fog, too, and the grass and the goddamn mongooses. Everything talks. The trees talk politics, the monkeys talk religion. The whole country. Vietnam. The place talks. It talks. Understand? Nam—it truly talks. (81-82)

Sanders, who almost compulsively identifies the moral of every situation, finds himself at a loss to come up with a single, definitive moral for his own story. It becomes a matter of just “listen[ing] to your enemy” (83)—or acknowledging the texture of “What quiet—or just listen[ing]” again (94). The focus on the ways in which Vietnam articulates itself transcends the distinctions made between the animate and the inanimate, the stories and the storyteller. The irrevocable blurring of boundaries calls to attention the very nature of relation. In the shifts and substitutions between bodies, stories, Vietnam, and home that function throughout the text, what part of each figure remains untouched by the others? Embedded within Sanders’s assertion about the ability of Vietnam to speak rests the figure of the body. The invocation of the body immediately conjures up an attendant vision: the potential of Vietnam to produce acts of storytelling that will orient O’Brien’s displacement and enable him, finally, to tell a true war story.

*The Things They Carried* is a book that turns on a single realization: as part of imagining a return to Vietnam as home to engender a new way of reading and writing the world, distinctions disappear and the impossibility of separating experiences and stories, reality and the imaginary, into orderly categories transcends the desire for neatness and clarity. O’Brien’s post-Vietnam world is a confusing, ambiguous place. No hard and fast rules exist; truth is always provisional, waiting to adapt its function throughout the text, what part of each figure remains.

The figural relationships in the text make it unimaginable to talk about anything in isolation. The metonymic act of substitution does more than replace one term with another; in the semiotic space between the two signs, meaning explodes beyond the signifying capacities of either figure, revealing the futility of talking about one figure without constantly referring to the other. And it is precisely that movement between tropes—a movement reinforced by the structure of the text as a collection of stories which talk to each other—that produces a more complicated vision of the world. In O’Brien’s war stories, the figurations of home/body/Vietnam/stories coalesce to produce an awareness of how no single idea can be unraveled from the cloth woven by the connections between each of them. It is a profound realization, leaving us to say, with wonder and a little awe, “Oh.”

**NOTES**

(1.) In the words of Andrew Martin, “the Vietnam War has maintained a stranglehold on the American imagination” (5). This “stranglehold” manifests itself in both pop cultural and political discourses. The outpouring of books, movies, and television shows, not to mention President Bush’s assertion that the Persian Gulf war would “not be another Vietnam,” attests to the accuracy of Martin’s statement. For an account of Vietnam’s influence on American skepticism toward military solutions for third world problems, see Klare. For an interpretive critique of the literature and criticism of the Vietnam War, see Lomperis. For discussions of the representation of Vietnam in popular visual culture, see Martin; Adair; and Dittmar and Michaud.

(2.) While Hellmann’s conception of a national narrative powerfully identifies the continued impact of the war on American political and cultural discourses, it is important to note that the very idea of a single narrative of nation is necessarily a reductive one. For a nuanced study of the disparate and sometimes competing “national” discourses America took into the war, see Milton Bates’s *The Wars We Took to Vietnam*. Bates’s examination of the war as a collection of America’s multiple domestic conflicts—about territorial expansion, race, class, gender, and generational difference—challenges the applicability of single paradigms to complex situations. This recognition of the multiplicity of war is also articulated by Le Ly Hayslip in her memoir *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places*: “Most of you did not know, or fully understand, the different wars my people were fighting when you got here. For you, it was a simple thing: democracy against communism. For us, that was not our fight at all... For most of us it was a fight of independence—like the American Revolution. Many of us also fought for religious ideals, the way the Buddhists fought the Catholics. Behind the religious war came the battle between city people and country people—the rich against the poor—a war fought by those who wanted to change Vietnam and those who wanted to leave it as it had been for a thousand years. Beneath all that, too, we had vendettas: between native Vietnamese and immigrants (mostly Chinese and Khmer) who had fought for centuries over the land. Many of these wars go on today” (xv).

(3.) In mounting a challenge to the conventions of narrative, O’Brien’s project of problematizing truth is embodied by the narrator of *The Things They Carried*. While the narrator is named “Tim,” and it is tempting to read him as synonymous with the real Tim O’Brien, there are distinctions between the narrator and the author that prevent any easy assignment of authorial intention or identity.

(4.) Both Philip D. Beidler in *Re-writing America* and Philip H. Melling in *Vietnam in American Literature* refer to the idea of the veteran as an expatriate or exile in the country
of his birth. For a collection of articles exploring this paradigm, see Figley and Leventman.

(5.) All short stories referred to in the text are names of specific stories in *The Things They Carried*.

(6.) See Bates 248-52 for a more detailed discussion of the ways in which “Tim” and Tim O’Brien do and do not correspond to each other.

(7.) This idea of the journey being the destination is reinforced by O’Brien’s insistence on the provisionality of truth. In a footnote to his 1994 work *In the Lake of the Woods*, O’Brien couches his refusal to give a conclusive ending to the novel as one informed by the idea of an uncertain journey with no end: “My heart tells me to stop right here, to offer some quiet benediction and call it the end. But truth won’t allow it. Because there is no end, happy or otherwise. Nothing is fixed, nothing is solved. The facts, such as they are, finally spin off into the void of things missing, the inconclusiveness of conclusion.... Our whereabouts are uncertain. All secrets lead to the dark, and beyond the dark there is only maybe” (304).

(8.) The idea of mutilation and dismemberment as a way of denying humanity to the enemy is explored in Mark Baker’s collection of oral histories, particularly in the chapters “Victors” and “Victims” (167-236).

**WORKS CITED**


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