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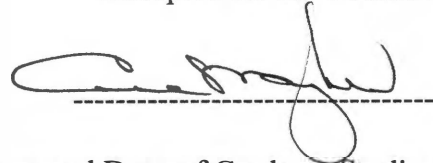
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**Trauma: Survival, Repetition, and Representation
in Aftermath Vietnam War Literature**

**A Thesis Presented for the Masters of Arts Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville**

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Abstract

This study examines Aftermath Vietnam War literature-- literature where the bulk of the text is set in the United States after the Fall of Saigon (1975). Discussion of the following texts appear in the work: Larry Heinemann's *Paco's Story*, Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country*, and Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*. I consider how survival, repetition and memorial figure as ways to articulate what happens to the individual and community during and after such traumatic confrontations as the Vietnam War. Veterans bring home elements of their battlefield experiences—ambiguity, disorientation and being “bunkered-in.” This creates an alienated existence that spreads to the larger community.

In addition to alienation, compulsive repetition becomes a systematic attempt to find meaning and origin—to somehow capture the traumatic moment. Trauma cannot be fully experienced; the void is a necessary part of trauma, and it is that void that both alludes and obliges representation. Therefore, compulsive repetition guides us toward, at a minimum, these purposes: bearing witness to horrors of the war, condemning the immorality of war, implicating the larger community's participation in war, remember the dead, and beginning to repair the damaged psyche. This is clearly why memorial is so important. The way we represent war to the community must not be a false representation. False representations include strict adherence to chronology, linearity, closure, and the myth heroism.

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Introduction

The Fall of Saigon

The image of the last chopper lifting off the Embassy in Saigon is constantly replayed in America's cultural consciousness. This phantom chopper, the one spilling over with people, some desperately clutching the runners, has become a large part of Vietnam War myth. This myth is motivated by the desire to have witnessed the end of the Vietnam War. In its insistent return, mass reproduction of the image of the *last huey* in photographs, films, and literature is evidence that trauma remains. Often conjured in popular films of return to Vietnam, this image represents a starting point for recuperation. Recuperation filled with rage and guilt is elusive because of the ways we try to attain it. Hollywood endeavors to attain closure with epic revenge fantasies such as *Missing in Action* series. The death and destruction America visited on the Vietnamese people haunts such revenge. The fall of Saigon initiates a search for origins that carries with it the guilt of abandonment, not only guilt concerning the South Vietnamese government we promised to help, but also remorse for abandoning the Vietnamese citizens who in some cases became the friends of many Americans, as well as the many POWs and MIAs left behind.

This ambivalent combination of rage and guilt prevent the image of the *last huey* from serving to function as intended—as closure. Repetition is a symptom of this lack of closure. If it were possible simply to remember or re-experience the

traumatic moment and achieve closure, repetition would not occur in representations of the Vietnam War. Compulsive repetition guides us toward, at a minimum, these purposes: bearing witness to horrors of the war, condemning the immorality of war, implicating the larger community's participation in war, remember the dead, and beginning to repair the damaged psyche.

The *last huey* is a type of repressed primal scene for U.S. cultural history repeatedly returning to haunt Aftermath Vietnam War literature. The flight of the *last huey* has become an archeological site where the search for origins and meaning is repeated in Vietnam War literature studies, American pop culture, and American consciousness. Associated with the traumatically ambiguous Vietnam War and its ending, this image provides a starting point that challenges us to reconcile the image with experience. How can we represent these events so that we can expiate guilt, clam rage and relive horror? Repetition strives for complete representation. Survival is a state of psychic vulnerability bought about by failed representation. A part of such survival is the compulsion to repeat. Representation, survival and repetition are ways that authors, narrators, and characters attempt to articulate what happens to the individual and community during and after such traumatic confrontations as the Vietnam War.

This study examines three key works of Aftermath Vietnam War literature—Larry Heinemann's *Paco's Story* (1989), Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country* (1985), and Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1997)--literature where the bulk of the text is set in the United States after the Fall of Saigon (1975). These aftermath novels

explore and enact ways to represent trauma associated with the Vietnam War through examining survival, repetition and memorial. This study is limited to Aftermath literature, and these three novels and therefore considers only American experiences of this war. These three texts provide examples of how the individual (soldiers) and community (those who remained home) represent traumas of the Vietnam War. Compulsive repetition, a turning away, and memorial can all function as apparatus of forgetting and of not forgetting. Representations of trauma that are most effective are non-linear, fragmented articulations. Due to the nature of trauma, it is impossible to ever completely represent such horrors, but these texts offer an opportunity to examine the ways we can attempt to articulate it and the limitations of such articulation. We must continue to represent trauma despite the impossibility, since that very impossibility speaks for the horror that we must try to prevent from recurring. These texts offer one of the most effective ways of accomplishing this goal—they demythologize war by detailing the aftermath experiences of the Vietnam War in their veteran characters. In reading these texts and sharing the experiences of Vietnam Veterans, we learn that war is not a heroic, complete narrative—that voids remain—and that it is frequently an unspeakable experience.

History

The end of the war is shrouded in ambiguity. The war officially ended in January 1973 with the Paris Peace Accords, yet in April 1973, two years before the Fall of Saigon, many military advisors with civilian status continued to work with the

South Vietnamese Army (Moss 413, 416). The war continued without active American participation, and Congress would only approve humanitarian aid in the form of airlifts after this point. What about April 1975? Was the Fall of Saigon the end of the war? Or did the end come, for Americans, much later with the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C.? Can we even designate a common end of the war, or is it subjective? We certainly cannot determine where trauma ends; in its repetition, it never fully ends.

This lack of closure is part of what makes the Vietnam War distinct from other wars of the twentieth-century. If we turn to historical facts about these wars, it is easy to see that a traumatic loss of life occurred in all twentieth-century wars. Personal and public trauma is difficult to document or measure. For instance, World War I, (1914-1918) was a violent and destructive war: 65 million men were mobilized, 10 million killed, and 20 million wounded. In terms of lost lives and material destruction, World War II (1939-1945) was the most devastating war in human history. The Holocaust alone accounts for millions of deaths of Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, disabled Germans and countless others. Yet, these numbers cannot account for the magnitude of traumatic effects; all wars are traumatic. There may have been fewer killed in the Vietnam War, but the following elements make it especially traumatic: the soldiers' disorientation in the jungle terrain and their difficulty in recognizing enemy forces among civilians, a divided home front and the anti-war movement, the disillusionment of soldiers, and an overall uncovering of ideology. These factors demonstrate why the trauma of Vietnam lingers in the

American psyche. Logistically, the Vietnam War was much different from these other wars. Disorientation played a large role in the Vietnam War experience as there were no distinct front lines, and the enemy could not be easily identified. Such disorientation increased the ambiguity—soldiers could not tell whether they were killing civilians or combatants--making trauma more complicated to identify and resolve. The cultural atmosphere in the United States during and after the Vietnam War differed from these other twentieth-century wars. In American representations of WWII, the term “homefront,” and the solidarity between American soldiers and civilians has come to symbolize the cultural climate during this war. In this case, a civilian population believed they were taking part in a morally just aim. To sacrifice for the war effort, whether through rationing or working, appealed to many religious and patriotic values.

The Vietnam War experience differed from these other wars mainly due to the social situation in American culture. Public support for the Vietnam War was much less than for World War II, and that support diminished as the war stretched out. A primary reason for this diminished support, in addition to the length of the war, was that disillusionment and an uncovering of ideology erupted during the Vietnam War. This exposed ideology includes the myths that war is just, that killing can be heroic, and that America knows best. How this disillusionment occurred is complex, and it is impossible to point to one occurrence that debunked these myths for a larger portion of society than previously possible. We see symptoms of this in Aftermath Vietnam War literature in the ways individual trauma reaches the larger community.

Trauma

Tragedy most often employs a clear moral perspective, a linear narrative, and always a closed ending, but trauma can defy tragic conventions. Trauma pushes the limits of recovery; it forces us to ask what, if any, kind of reparation can occur. In its closure, tragedy implies a sense of recovery. This is a false sense of recovery, an impossible and incomplete catharsis. For example, Aristotelian tragedy must have, at its center, action. Characters are secondary to this action. As Aristotle puts it, “tragedy then is a representation of an action that is worth serious attention, complete in itself, and of some amplitude” (*On the Art of Poetry* emphasis mine 38-39). This complete action implies resolution, yet not one that can occur before catharsis. This differs from trauma because trauma implies passivity in the inability to fully witness or represent the traumatic moment. Tragedy is “presented in a form of action, not narration; by means of pity and fear bringing about the purgation of such emotions” (39). Catharsis implies that witnessing tragic action has a beneficial effect—that it cures. Aristotle places an emphasis on structure, “spectacle is an essential part of tragedy” (39). This attempt to represent or imitate the spectacle of action is an effort to recreate traumatic moments for observation. This is one of the main challenges of representation. Such representation is impossible, yet continually sought after; if mimesis occurs, there is a possibility for a trace of cathartic healing will transpire. Trauma, however, exceeds the bounds of representation in its origin—as that moment is impossible to fully witness.

Cathy Caruth's definition of trauma as a "delay or incompleteness of knowing...an overwhelming occurrence that then remains, in its insistent return, absolutely true to the event" provides a lens that we can use to view responses of characters in these novels (*Unclaimed Experience* 5). The psyche repeats traumatic memories of violence because they elude understanding. The impulse to repeat is one response to such violence. According to Caruth, trauma manifests itself as a necessarily delayed and recurring response to an overwhelming violent event or series of events that cannot be completely comprehended at the place of origin (*Unclaimed Experience* 91). We see this recurring effect of trauma in Aftermath Vietnam War literature, specifically the novel in its treatment of the individual and community. Effects of trauma, in these cases, reach both the soldiers and the community, and are apparent on psychological and social planes. Repetition becomes a systematic attempt to find meaning and origin—to somehow adequately respond to the traumatic moment—dedicated to pushing the boundaries of that *respons-ability*. Such recurrence is a necessary reflex attesting to the impossibility of finding the origin or meaning of the traumatic moment. Trauma cannot be fully recovered; the void is a necessary part of trauma, and that void both eludes and obliges representation, an emotional response, and catharsis.

How then can we make sense of the Vietnam War and the trauma that accompanies experiences of that war? The trauma that occurred during the Vietnam War is similar to the trauma that occurs in any war—death, disillusionment, and often a devaluing of life. What makes the trauma of the Vietnam War experience different

from the other wars of the twentieth-century is that representations of this experience act out the symptoms of trauma in their delay, repetition, and the struggle survivors of the Vietnam experience have with survival and lack of community that accompanies that survival. Veterans bring home elements of their battlefield experiences—disorientation, and being the sense of being “bunkered-in.” This creates a lonely individual existence that spreads to the larger community, manifesting itself as a crisis of confidence. What we see occur is both over and under-compensation--belligerence and self-doubt.

The Vietnam War is a site of trauma that, for many, denies a sense of closure, and this is why we continue to see attempts to represent this trauma in Aftermath Vietnam War novels. The nature of representations of the war, including elements of repetition, delay, and open endings, tend to make the Vietnam War, at least in its fictional representations, distinct from the other wars of the twentieth-century. In representations of these other wars the account or story often appears complete. The story reintegrates individual into society; when the individual and community are integrated, healing begins. To make such a distinction between the Vietnam War and the other wars of the twentieth-century is not to imply that these other wars are not tragic, nor does it deny that trauma occurred in these wars. Often, however, the sentiment associated with these other wars is tragic resolution rather than trauma insofar as tragedy is associated with a false sense of catharsis.

The Novel

Varied representations of the Vietnam War aftermath appear in these novels. Some of these novels fail in their heroic one-sided depictions, overlooking suffering by all involved. A subgroup of these aftermath novels, however, attempts to represent these traumas by pushing the boundaries of narrative. Novelistic representations of the Vietnam War often exhibit a series of possible endings and a repetitive quality that makes this war representative of a certain acting out of trauma. Often fragmented, disordered, or repetitive writing accompanies attempts to articulate the trauma of this war. Before postmodernism, the novel imposes a narrative and demands some sense of order and form. Order and form seem an impossibility when representing trauma, yet they also provide a form to be subverted, something to be interrupted or momentarily suspended in order to depict trauma. We can push the boundaries of memorial representations through manipulating narrative structure just as we do with verbal representations by making the disjointed narrative reflect a fragmented experience and by obliging readers/viewers to participate in piecing that narrative together. The Wall becomes the central, and delayed, monument representing loss of life and the chronology of that loss. The structure of the monument in linear narrative form imposes chronology and order on the disordered experiences, yet offers an interactive memorialization that offers more than a heroic figure in bronze.

Organization

The following chapters will explore aftermath Vietnam War representations of trauma. In them, survival and repetition become a vicious cycle, both linking and forming a chasm between the individual and community. Each chapter will examine survival, repetition, and representation (through survival, repetition, and memorial) as embodied in the literary texts. These chapters will question what the act of testimony, of “bearing witness,” means to an individual survivor and to a community of survivors. These texts--*Paco's Story*, *In Country*, and *The Things They Carried*--show an obligated acknowledgement of that survival and a reenacting as a representation of trauma. Survivors create a literature of trauma, stemming from the necessity to tell and retell the story of the traumatic experience in order to make it “real” to the victim, the community, and the larger public. Repetition in the form of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), nightmares, flashbacks, and a compulsion to repeat traumatic situations become ways through which survivors represent trauma. I will consider how effective this is, what signs of partial recovery such repetition holds in these novels, and how individuals and communities encompass diverse ways of repeating trauma. These chapters also discuss the role memorial plays in trauma, survival and repetition. By looking at representations and reactions to fictional and factual monuments, I will consider possible ways to memorialize without containing or trying to force a conclusion on trauma. This discussion also broadens what has been called the Vietnam Generation to include an intergenerational group of parents and children of survivors. All three chapters will consider what, if any, indication we

have for partial recovery and the form through which the texts represent the traumatic moment, and the delay of that moment.

Chapter One
Paco's Story: Survival, Repetition, and Representation

Severe traumatic moments often defy understanding and exceed the limits of language; thus healing and resolution remain elusive. Wars are examples of such trauma. As I have argued, circumstances of the Vietnam War amplified this trauma and the symptoms of its survivors. Many of these survivors have overwhelming symptoms such as compulsive repetition; such repetition is necessary for survivors attempting to come to terms with the horrors of traumatic experience. In these circumstances the event can never be fully remembered, spoken or understood. A survivor of trauma is not a heroic John Wayne figure. Survival is, rather, a “mode of existence determined by the impossible structure of the response” (Caruth *Unclaimed Experience* 100). This “impossible structure of the response” is a group of defenses that makes possible survival of the traumatic moment, but it also prevents the survivor from telling of the experience that alienates them from the larger community. Freud’s *The Phenomenology of the Dream-Process*, provides an example of such a response when he recounts the case of a father who stays by his son’s deathbed day and night until the son dies; the father leaves the corpse in the charge of an old man while the father sleeps in an adjacent room with the door ajar. While sleeping, the father dreams the son takes hold of his arm, asking reproachfully, “Father don’t you see that I am burning?” Waking to a bright light coming from the other room, the father discovers that the old man fell asleep and that a fallen candle has burned the sheets on his son’s arm. Freud explains this dream as an attempt to extend the life of the child; he is, after

all alive in the dream. Expanding this reading, Cathy Caruth suggests that “If the awakening reenacts the father’s survival of his son’s death, then this survival is no longer simply the effect of an accident but carries within it, and is defined by, its response to the words of the death child” (102). These words-- “Father, I am burning”-- beckon the father. The father is incapable of articulating the traumatic moment of his son’s death, but rather is obligated by words from outside himself to respond. The response must then be a realization that he has, in fact, survived the death of his son. In order to represent the trauma of the son’s death and his own survival of that death, the father experiences a repetition of the son’s death through the accidental burning of the corpse. Survival, in this case, demands one “bear witness” to the trauma. In a similar manner, repetitive representation becomes the primary form of bearing witness in Aftermath Vietnam War literature.

In this literature trauma survivors experience a compulsive repetition, stemming from the need to tell. This experience is paradoxical in that survivors adopt defenses that prevent them from telling yet mark their traumatic moment in social symptoms. Under these circumstances, social symptoms are manifest in the physical distance the survivor has from the community *and* the community’s sense of a proximity to the survivor by their mere presence. This, in turn, creates a cyclical traumatic affect. This cycle begins with a delayed response in which the survivor repetitively and paradoxically attempts to both remember and forget the traumatic moment. Defenses protect the traumatized from their experience, yet these defenses also deny the traumatized the opportunity to work through the trauma. For the

community in these novels, this traumatic effect manifests by forcing the community to confront the existence of traumatic moments and the survivors of such experiences. The presence of trauma survivors generates delayed responses to trauma on behalf of the larger community. The residual effects of that trauma will not allow the community to deny their passive participation in the circumstances of that traumatic moment.

Paradoxical defenses that Vietnam veterans display often fall into one, or a combination of three images that Toby Herzog outlines as stereotypes: the Blank Page, the Tripwire, and the Interstate Nomad (113-14). The Blank Page is all things to all people. This image is one of a survivor who is completely void of any self-identity. The Tripwire veteran keeps a distance from the community, the tripwire signifying a noisemaker as distant warning. In such cases we have a “bunkered in” veteran. The Interstate Nomad is the type of veteran who lacks community and continuously wanders in search of this impossibility. These three images offer three forms of repetition compulsion. In *Paco's Story*, other than the ghost narrator(s), the two primary Vietnam veteran characters, Paco and Jesse, vacillate between being bunkered in as the Tripwire veteran and wandering without community as the Interstate Nomad. Herzog argues that labeling veterans by these categories is an example of “Americans attempting to reconcile with traumatized Vietnam Veterans construct images of these individuals to fit myths, stereotypes, reality, or social, political, ideological, and literary agendas” (Herzog 113-114). Although this may be true, such categories also help sort out different ways of working through trauma.

Paco's Story tells the story of Paco Sullivan's near-death experience in Vietnam and his return to the United States. Paco is incapable of telling his own story, so a ghostly presence, one or many of the soldiers who died at Fire Base Harriet where Paco's traumatic experience occurs, narrates the novel. Another ghostly figure in the novel is the auditor, James. As Heinemann explains in the foreword, James represents a collective stranger. The story of the novel, as Louis GRIEFF intimates, occurs between soldiers and a civilians (386). Detailing Paco's alienation from the community, the novel suggests Paco's need to tell his story. This story cannot be told from Paco's point of view, as his inability to articulate is one of his traumatic symptoms. Paco unwillingly tells his story through his physical disability, whereas the ghosts, without physicality, tell Paco's story through language. The ghosts represent the residual material of the past that haunts Paco, "making him remember."

Characters in Larry Heineman's *Paco's Story* struggle with their positions as survivors and attempt to negotiate their role in the community. Through this negotiation repetition occurs as a form of realization of the alienation caused by being a survivor of trauma that the survivor cannot easily represent through language. Representation becomes, rather, a motile passivity. *Paco's Story* explains the lives of four Vietnam veterans: the main character Paco, who is a survivor of physical and psychological trauma; the medic who found Paco and blames his failure in life on Paco's survival; Jesse, a wandering nomad; and the narrator(s), an unnamed ghost from Fire Base Harriet where he died and Paco survived. As already mentioned, Paco

and Jesse are examples of the tripwire veteran, and the interstate nomad (Herzog

113). An interstate nomad

symbolize[s] troubled veterans' quests for isolation and anonymity... highlight[ing] the authors', readers', and society's ability or inability to fill the blank page, to manage these veterans, and to relegate them to a comfortable place in the American psyche. (113)

Paco and Jesse are interstate nomads. We see Paco develop into this nomad as he survives a terrible physical and psychological trauma in Vietnam, endures a lengthy recovery from his physical wounds in an Army hospital, and lands in a small-town community after riding a bus until his money runs out. His inability to assimilate into the community forces Paco to face his psychological wounds.

We see from Paco's bus journey that he has no home worth returning to once he is back in the United States. We do not, however, understand this homelessness until we meet Jesse, a free talker, who tells Paco of his wandering and thereby divulges his inability to become a member of a community. Jesse's alienation from society develops from his "postwar compulsion to rediscover America" (Greiff 383). Jesse lists the many places he has been, choosing to describe the cabin home on the Montana-Idaho border where he was "bunkered-in."

Lived there the better part of a year; scrounged work; stayed just as stoned as stoned could be; drank like a fish, whiskey and bourbon and all that good Scotch—I figured if I stayed stoned and falling-down drunk, I wouldn't be held responsible if I fucked anybody up. (155)

Jesse, feeling so beyond control, had to hide away from society; obviously that was not enough for him to feel safe. He feared what he could, and possibly, would do. His solution was to dig in further away from society and the responsibilities of living with

others. His use of drugs and alcohol became a visible disability for his invisible psychological struggles. He knows that he cannot function like other members of a community and therefore physically removes himself by living in a rural cabin, and then further removes himself with props and excuses for his actions—drugs and alcohol. It is easier for him to excuse himself and be excused by others in the name of substance abuse than to confront the inexplicable lingering trauma.

Jesse, however, tells us that he learned something while being bunkered away; that he is “a fully stamped, qualified *slab* animal—successful species—who made it out of their...lab” (155-56). “Their lab” is the industrial military complex. Like Jesse, Paco will articulate his sense of a disregard for human life as he learns that he cannot remain in Boone. These men share an outlook similar to that of the medic who will recount the story of the catastrophe at Fire Base Harriet: that the war machine wasted their life. What is ironic here is the sense of defeat that accompanies this feeling of worthlessness. If these men recognize that a low regard for their life somehow damages them, they still cannot find a way to feel more than a “piece of meat on the slab,” as Paco describes himself (209). A nomad veteran searches to become more than a wasted living body, and it seems that these men equate belonging to a community with being worth the body they reside in.

Jesse’s character functions to provide a glimpse of a nomad-veteran’s motives. This later helps us understand Paco’s alienation and wandering. We rarely hear Paco’s voice, as the ghost narrator(s) does most of the speaking for him. We know that Paco senses he does not belong, and soon after arriving in Boone, he contemplates

leaving, but is helpless without any money and must stay. Jesse, however, speaks for a restlessness that Paco seems to be experiencing. Paco is too passive to leave town until prompted by Jesse's story and his neighbor Cathy's diary, wherein she describes her shift from an attraction to Paco to a disgust for him. Opinions other than Cathy's appear in her diary. She includes the thoughts of her aunt and uncle, Paco's landlords, and members of the community Paco stands outside of.

Aunt Myrna says he has a way of stiffening up and staring right through you. As if he's a ghost. Or you're the ghost.

How could I have ever thought it might be fun to sleep with him? Unc says that creeps like him are best got rid of, and is going to start working on him. (206)

The three attitudes voiced in this diary entry characterize the thoughts of the larger community. Aunt Myrna is a woman of the community, Unc a business owner, and Cathy a young college student. After reading this entry, Paco realizes that he must move on; he does not belong to this community.

Even before Jesse enters the scene, Paco recognizes that he is incapable of staying in Boone. "Just like a fucking new guy, Paco thinks to himself as he slides a leg over a stool and hangs the handle of his cane on the bar. Let's have our beer and drink our beer, and when the rain lets up, we'll move on" (64). Despite this, Paco has no choice; he has no money, food, or a place to stay. His search for a job provides an example of the alienation he will experience throughout his time in Boone. Going from shop to shop Paco asks for work and a place to stay. He asks where there is no work, such as the antique shop. He asks where he is denied for being too large a business risk due to his veteran status.

A veteran a body ought to help along, and he's got about the right haircut, but that cane, those roughened clothes, and that funny look in his eyes (they all got it, don't they?) wouldn't sell so much as one decent pair of shoes, ask me. Besides, a body hears too many stories as to how they got to acting so peculiar. (84)

Here we have an example of how this small-town community, places that are ostensibly more welcoming toward veterans, can be so unwelcoming to Vietnam veterans. The speaker acknowledges that he *ought* to help a veteran, but cannot under the circumstances. These circumstances are the Vietnam War, and the residual effects that a Vietnam veteran such as Paco carries with him. You can see these effects in that “funny look in his eyes,” “that cane,” and the “peculiar” way he may act. Paco is an outsider simply because of his veteran status. People fear what he will do. They have heard stories about Vietnam War veterans, and in addition to this stigma Paco is physically disabled.

Hostility toward Paco increases as the reader follows his search for a job. We gain a sense of the community that does not even question if they should help him and discover that Paco is an unwelcome outsider. At Rita's diner, one of the men even tells Paco to “beat feet” asking, “Ain't that what they say?” (64). “They” refers to soldiers in Vietnam. This man not only tells Paco to leave town, but also blatantly reveals that he knows Paco is a Vietnam veteran and not wanted. Paco's initial presence tends to invoke this strange hostility mixed with fear. The community reacts this way as part of the second cycle of trauma. Paco's presence reminds them of their passive participation in the traumatic situation that shaped the survivor they fear. They act hostile toward the survivor because his presence forces them to acknowledge

the trauma that they must deal with. This is a repetitive reaction to trauma. Just as Paco carries his defenses that help him survive, the community does as well, and both parties, in their defenses, create a void that refuses to speak of the trauma, denying the impossibility of resolution. If recovery is impossible, they do not want to bother working through any part of the trauma. The possibility of *failing better* lacks any appeal.

Just when Paco stops asking for a job and spends his last dollar on some chili at the Texas Lunch, the owner, a World War II veteran, offers Paco a job, tells him where he can stay, and gives him money for his lodging. Ernest's generosity toward Paco comes closer to what we usually associate with small communities' attitudes toward veterans. In this community, such kindness could only come from a veteran. Other than Jesse, this man, Ernest, is the only person with whom Paco really speaks, and he usually only listens to what these men have to say. Nonetheless, Paco connects to the two men. The extent of Paco's community consists of two veterans; one is his boss, the other only stops for dinner before moving on.

The only other community we know Paco has belonged to is that which experienced the disaster that occurred at Fire Base Harriet. Members of this community "swap that peculiar look around that travels from victim to victim in any disaster" (14). This community occurred moments before the destruction of all ninety-three members and the survival of one—Paco. Communities Paco belongs to are momentary and linked with disaster. This community plays a significant role in the form of this novel. Critics such as Gregory Morris suggest that in Vietnam

Literature the means of telling a story is as significant as the story itself (58). One narrative technique that seems appropriate for trauma is what Bahktin terms heteroglossia. This multi-voiced narration appears most explicitly in the communal voice of the narrator(s) (Morris 59). This same community, after sharing *that peculiar look*, also shares the echoes of their screams that outlast their lives. “That blood-curdling scream is rattling all over God’s ever-loving Creation” (17). Their bodies may have disappeared in the attack, but the echoes of their agony will not be silenced. These voices speak for Paco. This minor connection with others does not balance Paco’s alienation. The narrator(s) describe(s) the community of Boone from the distance of an outsider.

Often the community of Boone reaches Paco, the narrator(s), and the reader through sound. Paco hears his neighbor, Cathy, having intercourse and hears jeers from a Saturday morning baseball game. The narrators (notice the *we*) describe the sounds of community during a summer evening:

We can sit on the thick slate curb, under the parkway walnuts, and hear the squeak of wicker chairs; the tumble of ice melting to slivers in glasses of Coke and tea and whiskey; the whisper and popping to buttons; women flapping and fluttering their summer dress fronts; the shrill squeal of children racing through swirling clouds of fireflies, a game better than tag; someone spitting of dry pavement; the snick-snick-snick of a loose pack of town dogs trotting across the schoolyard. Then comes that sound that all but stops the others even the dogs—the step, tap-step, of that gimpy kid wounded in the war, that guy Paco. (165-66)

Such juxtaposition of a nostalgic community scene and Paco’s interruption serves to reinforce Paco’s alienation. Not only does Paco feel excluded in Boone, a town that symbolizes at this point any small town in America, but the community is

also somehow disturbed by his presence. His step, tap-step jolts the harmony of a summer evening-- "that sound that all but stops the others"--with a reminder of the community's failure. The physically and audibly present reminder of Paco's limp and cane forces the community to face their involvement in the Vietnam War, especially at one of the most American times of all (the relaxation and play of a summer evening).

In addition to these more memorable descriptions of sounds, Paco is immediately in an awkward physical proximity to this community that excludes him. Both Paco's cane and limp signify the distant and awkward stance Paco has among these people as he comes into Boone and walks through searching for a job. After casually asking if there is work in the area at Rita's bar, the next place he enters is the antique shop owned by an elderly man. After laughing at Paco's request for work, the man asks Paco why he has a cane. In what follows the narrator(s) reflects and speaks for Paco.

How many times is it, James, that Paco has answered that? He has dwelt on it with trivial thoroughness, condensed it, told it as an ugly fucking joke (the whole story dripping with ironic contradiction, and sarcastic paradoxical bitterness)...There's been folks to whom he's unloaded the whole nine yards, the wretched soul-deadening dread...how he came to be wounded, the miracle of his surviving the massacre—as good as left for dead...[he] distills all that down to a single simple sentence, squares himself (standing straight as he can), looks the old man full in the face, and says bluntly, "I was wounded in the war." (72-73)

Struggling with how to explain his condition, Paco repeatedly searches for a way to communicate his experience. He continually faces failure settling on that simple sentence, the one the community of Boone will use to describe him: "wounded in the war."

Repetition surfaces in *Paco's Story* as a method the veteran characters use for working through how to represent their traumatic experiences. Early in the narrative we learn of the catastrophe at Fire Base Harriet through the medic's retelling. In a pattern of repetition the former medic will tell a drunken, angry story to anyone in the bar who will listen to how he would have been successful if it hadn't been for "this one guy"--that is, if Paco hadn't survived forcing the medic to face such impossible suffering. Survivors write, and in this case, speak a "literature of trauma" born of the need to tell and retell the story of the traumatic experience, to make it 'real' to the victim, the community, and the larger public" (Kal 1). The medic retells the story as though he cannot believe the one survival among the annihilation. Paco's survival becomes, in this story, like the son calling to the father in Freud's study—one that demands the witness acknowledge the loss—the loss of life, and the loss of not being able to fully experience that moment. The medic's response differs from the father in that the father cannot articulate and the medic compulsively does so. Although the medic's compulsive repetition is a form of articulation, he is fixed in a cycle that blocks the possibility of acknowledging loss. Inversely, in Freud's case, the father witnessing his son alive in his dream and dead upon waking, experiences a kind of second death of the child that allows him to acknowledge that death.

Paco does not speak or write his story; he lives it repetitively in his physical pain, nightmares, distance from society and, as we see at the close of the book, through his wandering. Paco never asks *why me*, so the ghosts ask it: *why him?* They make him dream to remember.

Dreams become one of the ways Paco represents his trauma. The narrator(s) describe(s) the dreams explaining that they recur nearly every night. Paco's execution dreams echo the disaster at Fire Base Harriet in that all the men are being systematically executed, while Paco does all he can to avoid watching, pressing his head against a cold concrete wall. Recurring elements of the disaster at Harriet make Paco feel claustrophobia, crowded in with all the other men as he was at Harriet where he was laying under decaying bodies. In his dreams the medics are stone faced while they administer syringes of poison. The poison never runs out, and neither do the soldiers to be executed. This mirrors the numbers of dead men surrounding Paco for the two days he was wounded unable to move, stranded at Harriet. During his two-day wait for aid, Paco was helpless, barely able to whisper; this helplessness returns in his dreams.

Paco's escape dreams, in which he always fails to escape a mob of angry men chasing him, contain spiritual elements. For instance, searching for an escape, a safe place, "Paco moves on, compelled, and comes to a part of the building that opens out like a cathedral gallery" (139). As he climbs upward, the smell of creosote becomes "as pungent as temple incense" (139). Paco's escape dream portrays him running from danger toward an impossible safety (he never escapes). Herzog argues that Paco is on a quest for a spiritual home where he can escape psychological demons (118). We see these elements in Paco's waking life. Although not part of a larger community, Paco remains quietly nearby. Paco is physically within, but psychologically distant from society. He hides in society rather than away from it, as

the Tripwire veteran does (Herzog 118). Yet, Paco cannot escape his past or his alienation. Although some in Boone contend they would know just from his 1000-yard stare that Paco is a Vietnam Veteran, the significance of Paco's obvious physical wounds and the necessity of a cane makes it difficult for him to hide his veteran status.

Another instance of Paco's inability to escape Vietnam occurs in the dream he has of leaving Vietnam "on his own two feet" (143). Walking among banners, brass, and regular GIs in his dirty boots and ragged fatigues, Paco waits, yet never hears his name called to board a plane. Even his dreams do not allow him to revise the past. Physical passivity prohibits Paco from actively leaving Vietnam on his own feet, and psychological passivity prohibits him from ever mentally leaving Vietnam, even in a dream. Any ability to actively leave fails to appear for Paco until the end of the novel. Yet, we still cannot celebrate a new-found active Paco, as he is running away from a community that excludes him and we do not know if he will ever find his community. We are left with a residual condition—an interstate nomad veteran.

Paco's representation of trauma is unavoidable, and never satisfactory; he cannot escape and is compelled to repeat in his dreams and wandering nomad lifestyle. Having heard of the disaster at Fire Base Harriet, Jesse asks Paco if he is bitter for being the sole survivor of ninety-three men. Paco responds, "I've sat up many a night brooding about that, rolling that around in my mouth, so to say, and yeah, I expect I'm as bitter as bitter can be, more than tongue can tell" (emphasis mine 163). Paco struggles with how to express his lingering agony. This is his first attempt to verbalize his lingering trauma. He never complains about his physical or psychological pain;

the narrator(s) do(es) all of this for him. Yet, the narrator(s) do(es) not relieve Paco of his obligation to remember, as we see in the case of the ghosts from Fire Base Harriet.

However, we also have instances where Paco remembers without prompting or a desire to remember.

[A]bruptly he remembers Gallagher's Bangkok R&R tattoo...He sees the tattoo, then suddenly remembers the rape of the VC girl and the dreams he has had of the rape. He winces and squirms; his whole body jerks, but he cannot choose but remember. (emphasis mine 174)

Such memories prevail upon Paco's passivity. The narrator(s) take(s) over at this point and describe(s) a horrendous rape and murder scene. When the audience is placed in the position of victim, it can experience an approximation of the experience. For example, as the narrator(s) describe(s) what the VC girl could see of Gallagher's tattoo as he held her by the hair, he says

(Take your hand, James, and reach around the top of your head, grab as much hair as you can grab in one hand and yank, then press that arm tight against the side of your head and look over, hard, at your arm out of the corner of your eyes. That's as much of Gallagher's arm as the girl saw). (176)

Attempts to explain such moments ask the reader to participate in the remembering, to be placed as close to the experience as possible. This call for mimetic action prompts the reader to reach up, to reenact; however, the reader is likely to turn away from this recognition letting his/her arm fall again to their side. The failure of this moment is similar to Sam's failure in *In Country* when she attempts to reenact traumatic

experience—there is no tangible threat. When describing a Vietnam War memorial, Jesse uses a similar mimetic gesture.

Jesse rejects heroic memorial representations of the war, bitterly proclaiming that when the country is ready for a monument it will be falsely heroic in order to make politicians, and “gun-toting,” “gung-ho guys” happy. The memorial he desires represents the experience of the Vietnam War. This memorial would be made of marble in the shape of a mortar crater, with the names arranged “first come, first served” (chronologically). It would be an interactive experience, a carnivalesque site with lights, and special media coverage for the unveiling. The crater would be filled with feces, blood, needles, and one hundred dollar bills stirred into a huge mess for people to scrounge around in barefoot through the muck for money, meanwhile slopping and smearing the disgusting matter all over the white marble. Obviously, Jesse sees the Vietnam War as a kind of circus of destruction, greed, and horror. Such a plan for a memorial as this places an emphasis on cutting through that “John Wayne crapola” (157). Although Jesse demands a anti-heroic memorial, he relies on a perverted mimesis. Jesse instructs us to remember what is horrendous about war through our monuments. His critique of heroic monuments rejects the revisionist temptation when determining how to represent war through memorial. This element recurs in Mason’s *In Country* where memorial moves beyond a false sense of heroism.

Unlike Jesse, Paco has not yet chosen how to represent his Vietnam War experience; the war has chosen for him. He must live with obvious physical markers of his participation in the Vietnam War. He cannot conceal his traumatic experiences

from himself, or, as we see with his dreams, the ghosts will not allow him to. These conditions lead to alienation that seems, if not fine with Paco, at least tolerable. He exists as an inactive presence until he sees through the example of Jesse that it is possible to seek a home and is provoked by Cathy's diary to search for a community where he is not "a piece of meat on the slab" (209). Finally, such alienation prompts Paco to make a choice—the first choice we see him make—to leave town. He follows Jesse's advice as he heads for the West-bound interstate: "Stick to the interstates. Local roads are for yokels and rookies and yoboes" (160).

Chapter Two

In Country: Survival, Repetition, and Representation

*I'm ten years burning down the road
Nowhere to run ain't got nowhere to go*
---Bruce Springsteen
"Born in the U.S.A."

The above quotation is the epigraph of Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country*. This epigraph echoes the alienation of Vietnam veterans. These elements that pervade popular culture in this novel effect repetitive gestures of the search for meaning of the novel's the main characters: Vietnam veteran, Emmett, and his niece, Sam. Mason's *In Country* describes a summer in the life of Sam Hughes and is largely a coming of age story; yet, this is also an aftermath Vietnam War novel. Sam, however, is not a veteran, but is the daughter of a soldier who died in Vietnam before she was born. Her coming of age demands that she come to terms with the Vietnam War and especially with her father's and Uncle's involvement in that war. Obsessed with learning everything she can about the war, Sam asks her uncle Emmett and his veteran friends what the war was like, but no one will tell her. All refuse her questions, suggesting that it is not her problem and that she should forget about the war. These veterans know too well what it means to live with the Vietnam War, as it blocks their ability to function "normally" in the society of mid 1980s America. Sam's behavior suggests that she also knows what living with the legacy of the Vietnam War means.

Just as in *Paco's Story*, the primary Vietnam veteran character of *In Country* has symptoms of both the nomad and tripwire veteran. Sam too has an inherited

interesting mix of nomad and tripwire symptoms; she is “bunkered-in” by her self-inflicted obligation to look after her uncle Emmett. Like the wandering nomad veteran, Sam searches for Vietnam, an event that is irretrievable to her. Her inability to recover events of the Vietnam War does not distinguish her from the veterans of the novel, but rather suggests her similarities with them. Mason’s placement of Sam in this position indicates that the Vietnam experience of trauma can be intergenerational. *In Country* primarily represents trauma as repetitive intergenerational searches for an understanding of Vietnam. Emmett, bunkered in, replays many of the defenses he adapted from survival in Vietnam to his survival among an American community; Sam’s obsession with Vietnam (the country and the war) forces her to constantly face obvious failure in her imagining of the Vietnam experience; in addition to these elements, members of three generations experience a delayed response during their journey to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C. Characters of *In Country* represent the Vietnam War experience through delay, search, and repetition. The form of *In Country* reflects these themes. The plot, divided into three parts, does not have a clear linear movement. Part I, set at the end of the summer places the reader in the middle of the trip to Washington D.C. Part II recounts Sam and Emmett’s experiences over the summer before the trip. Part III returns the reader to the journey to Washington. This plot structure reflects the themes of the novel—delay, search, and repetition—in the disruption of linear movement, the journey and the interruptions of that journey.

After returning from Vietnam, the primary veteran character, Emmett, lives with his sister, Irene, and his niece Sam. At this time he is unable to stay in one place and experiences a loss of selfhood and identity, and, later, suffers from physical ailments, such as pimples on his face, stomach trouble, and a sharp pain in his head. He lives with the possibility that he might “freak-out” as he did after his return. Sam fixates on Emmett’s various symptoms as though she will learn something from them about the Vietnam War. Paco is an outsider in Bonne while Emmett is accepted in Hopewell. The community knows Emmett; Paco is a stranger. Unlike *Paco’s Story*, *In Country* encompasses several communities. *Paco’s Story* takes place in a small-town community and tells of an alienated individual. *In Country* includes the family community of Emmett, Irene, and Sam, the slightly larger community of Vietnam veterans in the town, and then the town itself. Hopewell correlates with what we think a small-town attitude toward Vietnam veterans would be. One of the veterans explains: that,

They’ve got it twisted around in their heads what it was about, so they can live with it and not have to think about it. The thing is, they never spit on us here. They treated the vets O.K., because the anti-war feeling never got stirred up good around here. But that means they’ve got a notion in their heads of who we are, and that image just don’t fit all of us. Around here, nobody wants to rock the boat. (79)

These communities may be different, but the veterans remain outsiders. Emmett does not reassimilate, existing as a token oddity with little intervention or hostility from the community.

Despite the kindness of Hopewell, which differs so much from the hostility of Boone, the town Paco is in, Emmett still cannot function as part of this society. Emmett does not have or want a job; this is clear in his statement to Sam: "You just show me a job worth doing. I could have a job selling microwave ovens at that appliance store at the shopping center. But that may not even be moral. Lots of jobs ain't right, if you ask me. Microwaves cause cancer" (108). He has no desire to participate in the society that surrounds him. He sees a technologically based society (microwave ovens) in which people do not consider the consequences of their actions. This comment, "lots of jobs ain't right" implies Emmett's realization that his "job" in Vietnam wasn't "right," or "moral." Here Emmett accounts for the moral obligation to recognize his participation in destruction that occurred in Vietnam. Although not quite as passive as Paco, Emmett is not active and lacks any sense of direction. His reactions may differ from Paco because he returns from Vietnam many years before the start of the novel.

Emmett has a history of being a wandering nomad-veteran. His inability to remain in one place becomes apparent when he returns to his parents' home for two weeks and then leaves without a word. A few months later, he returns with some hippie friends and causes a ruckus in Hopewell, a place unfamiliar with war protests. Emmett creates a persona as an outsider through these actions. As the narrator tells us, "He couldn't adjust. Several months later, he returned, and Sam's mother let him live with them...People said Irene babied him. She treated him like someone disabled, and she never expected him to get a job. She always said the war 'messed him up' (23).

Yes, Emmett returns a different person. He adopts a personality in the town as a kind of crazy, but largely harmless, veteran; but the townspeople do not deny his place among the community.

This persona allows him to maintain a safe emotional distance from others in the community, and when this persona does not satisfy his need to remain distant he flees his family once again, and does so without notice. Long after the hippies move on, and after Irene moves to Lexington, Emmett leaves unexpectedly and without a word. Sam worries when Emmett does not return for a few days. When Irene arrives from Lexington with Emmett who is sleeping off the effects of his hangover, Sam is the only one who reacts as if Emmett's behavior is strange. Emmett has no desire to explain himself, and when Sam scolds him for not calling or leaving a note, Irene mocks Sam for being like her grandmother. Obviously, Irene is not surprised by Emmett's unpredictable behavior. She seems to realize that unpredictability is paradoxically predictable behavior for Emmett.

Emmett's wandering dramatizes his alienation. Soon after returning to the United States, Emmett goes into a clothing store. Sam recalls the story: "He stood there surrounded by dress pants and fine shirts, and sportswear, and he just froze. He no longer had any concept of who he was supposed to be" (237). His paralysis and loss of identity have a similar effect as his attitude concerning employment; he has no desire to be part of the social order. Emmett experienced another instance of paralysis that Irene relates to Sam: "Emmett flipped out for a while, and then you probably remember that time he lost the feelings in his legs. The doctors said he was

identifying with the paraplegics” (234). Sam constantly fears that Emmett will “flip out” again. Reminiscent of Paco, Emmett responds to trauma through his paralysis, loss of identity, and an inability to act. These veterans create defensive barriers to protect themselves from recalling traumatic moments, yet these barriers bar them from a strong sense of identity, unless that identity is the persona of outsider. As outsiders, they reduce their risk of developing close relationships, and therefore lower their risk of having to communicate their trauma. Their alienation communicates the presence of trauma, yet prevents them from attempting to communicate the trauma. Alienation prevents veterans from sharing their experiences with the larger community. Sharing these experiences is a necessity for preventing the recurrence of such trauma. Sam’s fear that Emmett will “flip out” complicates his attempts to communicate the traumatic moment. Perhaps, like the community in *Paco’s Story*, the community here, even family, fears being subject to such representations of trauma. This fear is understandable. It is the fear of the incomprehensible, that which is murky and does not have a clear linear movement or moral, i.e., trauma.

Like his motile passivity, Emmett’s physical ailments become signifiers for his psychological disturbance. Like Paco, Emmett cannot hide his residual physical effects of the war. Paco’s outward symptoms from the Vietnam War are easily identified with his experience. However, the community of Hopewell does not necessarily associate Emmett’s physical ailments with the Vietnam War; only his family, or the community of Vietnam veterans and especially Sam make a link between Emmett’s physical problems and his Vietnam experience. Emmett’s face and

neck are covered with pimples of unknown origin. Sam and others believe these pimples, along with a pain in his head and digestive irritability, are symptoms of the effects of Agent Orange. Agent Orange is a primary suspect in this story and becomes symbolic of the suspect government. Characters often blame the Veterans Administration (V.A.) for purposely failing to cooperate with attempts to be diagnosed, or even treated, for complications due to exposure to Agent Orange. These characters believe that the government, or at the very least the military industrial complex, is to blame for the atrocities of this war and its aftermath and could care for its veterans better.

Along with these more obvious physical symptoms, Emmett has psychological symptoms lingering from his time in Vietnam. Sam constantly fears the possibility that he might “freak out,” as he did after his return from Vietnam. One night at Cawood’s pond with Sam and her boyfriend Lonnie, Emmett undergoes a moment of psychological instability. We do not learn what triggers his reaction, but he immediately wants to leave, and insists that they leave quietly: “Lonnie, keep your cigarette inside your hand. Don’t show it...Be quiet! And don’t turn your lights on. Cut that engine! Let’s coast down to Highway 1...Hurry...I can’t stand this” (37-38). Emmett communicates his anxiety, but refuses to interact with anyone. He shouts at Sam and jerks away when she reaches out to him. His immediate need to focus on escaping his environment impedes any possibility of emotion other than fear or paranoia.

Sam hopes Emmett will feel better, yet does not wish for him to become something that he is not.

She realized that not every soldier that came back from Vietnam was as weird as Emmett. She knew of veterans—relatives of classmates—who had adjusted perfectly well. They had nice houses and wives and kids. They didn't wear skirts, even for a joke, and they didn't refuse to get a job or buy a car. (46)

Veterans who achieve any kind of social normalcy become status-sticks that other veterans are measured against. Everyone has a story of a Vietnam veteran who recovered. The following story Irene relates does not include immediate recovery yet becomes a benchmark for Emmett.

Larry knows a guy in Lexington who's got a good job in public relations. He was in Vietnam and he killed a whole *family* of people in a hut...he said it was two years before it hit him what he did. He was a dope addict and everything. But he finally got it worked out in his head and he figured the only thing he could do was try to live his life in some productive way. (171)

Notice the standards of recovery Irene points to: *good job*, *worked out in his mind*, and *productive*. These are all ideals of the larger socio-economic system. The problem with this is that if veterans become productive according to these standards, then their traumatic symptoms are no longer something the community will feel the need to deal with. Irene thinks that Emmett is foolish for not adopting these ideals. According to Sam, Irene's values have changed since she remarried and moved to Lexington, leaving Emmett and Sam behind in Hopewell. Irene did not abandon Sam; she wants Sam to move to Lexington with her and her newly formed family. She is

asking Sam to leave Emmett, the rural social order of the small-town, as well as her association with Vietnam for a more *normal* social existence.

Despite Emmett's lingering reactions to the Vietnam War, not all veterans experience such extreme responses. Distraught veterans such as Emmett are compared to "normal" veterans who are productive members of a capitalistic society. These success stories can indicate that some veterans were able to directly participate in the Vietnam War without experiencing trauma. Furthermore, these examples demonstrate how despite experiencing trauma, some can overcome that experience and be a productive citizen according to modern values, i.e., a good job and a family. This comparison becomes suspect, however, when recovery is exclusively defined as being a productive (in capitalistic terms as we see with Irene's story) citizen. An alternative to this would be for veterans to articulate trauma to the best of their abilities so that they can share the experience with others in order to demythologize the idea that war is a viable early option for resolving conflict. This way, both the individual and the community may gain a greater understanding of war's devastating effects.

Emmett's search for Vietnam is symbolized, not only by his nights at Cawood's pond that Sam later emulates, but more importantly by his search for an Egret. This bird symbolizes Emmett's only good memory of the war. Recalling this single positive memory forces Emmett to recognize that he has many awful memories. "That beautiful bird just going about its business with all that crazy stuff going on around it...Once a grenade hit close to some trees and there were these birds taking off

like quail, ever' which way. We thought it was snowing up instead of down" (36).

The memory of seeing such beauty among the destruction of Vietnam becomes a symbol not only of beauty, but by contrast destruction.

To search for this bird, Emmett must flee the larger community of the town for the secluded Cawood's pond. The search for Vietnam, according to another veteran, can only take place away from society. "You can't stay in town and afford to think about what happened" (79). Such memories and associations do not belong in the larger community; they only make the veterans feel more alienated. The veterans seem to fear what their reactions to their memories will be. Yet, what Emmett works through with his fixation on finding an Egret is more complicated than going to the woods in order to face his memories. Sam reflects on Emmett's search, recalling a meditation exercise that he once told her of used to keep the mind from wandering. She concludes, "if he concentrated...the pain of his memories wouldn't come through. His mind would be full of birds. Just birds and no memories. Flight" (139).

Paradoxically, fleeing his terrible memories in search of a reminder of a pleasant memory forces Emmett to recognize the bad as he moves toward the good. If one flees, one must flee something. He cannot be evading a complete unknown.

Manipulating the letters in Egret, one can form the word regret; Emmett's desire to find an Egret may lead us to believe that Emmett is trying to track down the origin of his regret. Again, we have an instance of Emmett attempting to come to terms with his moral obligation to remember. Ironically, Emmett's attempts to escape thoughts of the Vietnam War become repetitive compulsive behavior recalling and reenacting his

Vietnam experience. Although Emmett's search appears futile, he does not flee his Vietnam experience in this repetitive search, but rather seems to move toward it. This searching is the first step beyond repetition toward recovery.

Another primary instance of Emmett being active in this novel is when he is digging out around the basement, looking for a leak. He refers to his digging as excavating, calling it "noble work" and, as Sam observes, "He seemed obsessed" (44). Sam explains Emmett's digging by quoting a Beatles song: "I'm fixing a hole where the rain gets in/And stops my mind from wandering" (139). She understands these lines as a form of the meditation exercise that she believes Emmett performs with his fixation on the Egret. In this interpretation, fixing the hole keeps the mind from drifting. The flooding of the basement allows Emmett feel a sense of control because a leak is something that he can physically see and fix. It is unlike the ambiguous trauma that he cannot fix.

In contrast to Emmett, Sam consciously searches for Vietnam. She constantly asks veterans that she comes in contact with about Vietnam. She is certainly searching for her father in all this, yet her desire to know exceeds simply seeking her father. She makes multiple attempts to experience the Vietnam War for herself. She does this through asking questions, her fascination with the television program, *M*A*S*H*, period and contemporary music, and observing veterans' lifestyles. She also researches Agent Orange, makes an overnight stay in at Cawood's pond where she tests herself to see if she could survive Vietnam, and journeys to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C. Sam seeks associations with the Vietnam War

experience so that she can better understand that experience. Through conducting this search, Sam provides a link between the soldiers and civilians.

Sam uses the community of veterans in Hopewell as a site for her verbal attempts to excavate the experience of the Vietnam War. This group of people provides a community for both Emmett and Sam. Sam is permitted into the community to a certain point. Her uncle Emmett is a Vietnam veteran, some of them even knew her father, and they all know that Sam's father died in Vietnam. The veterans are kind to her and do not treat her like an outsider until she asks what the Vietnam War experience was like. Their responses are all the same—"you don't know unless you've been there." Even her mother, who has not been there, but is more concretely part of the Vietnam Generation, tells her that it was a long time ago and that Sam does not want to hear about it. Sam accuses her mother of trying to forget Vietnam. "You never told me anything—about him [her father], or about Vietnam. You always wanted to forget it, like it never happened. I think that's why you gave up on Emmett" (56). Here Sam reminds us of the importance of not forgetting and of not giving up on veterans such as Emmett. Everyone she asks tells her to stop asking about the Vietnam War. "It had nothing to do with you" (57). Sam, however, is part of the Vietnam Generation.

My mom said not to worry about what happened to Emmett back then, because the war had nothing to do with me. But the way I look at it, it had *everything* to do with me. My daddy went over there to fight for my mom's sake, and Emmett went over there for Mom's sake and my sake, to get revenge. (71)

Considering how the Vietnam War has so much to do with Sam's identity, we see how the Vietnam Generation can be considered intergenerational; we see this most clearly

when Sam, Emmett, and Sam's Grandmother travel to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

Sam's search for Vietnam leads her to her grandparents' home. As she drives to her father's childhood home in the country, Sam considers how she had originated during her parents' brief marriage:

She didn't know why the moment of origin mattered. Scientists were trying to locate the moment of origin of the universe. They wanted to know exactly when it happened, and how, and whether it happened with a big bang or some other way. Maybe the universe originated quietly, without fireworks, the way human life started. (192)

Again, we have a conscious search. Sam is searching for her father through her grandparents' recollections. She asks about him, but she also asks about Vietnam. Sam's grandmother tells Sam of her father's diary, explaining that there is not much information in it, but that she can have it if she wishes. When Sam reads the diary, she realizes that her grandmother must have only read the first few pages that listed facts, places, and routines. However, a little further into the diary, Sam's father writes of seeing friends get killed, finding corpses in the jungle, desiring to kill a *gook*, and feeling good when he finally does. Sam reels from the proximity of her father's insensitivity and the deaths he describes. She feels suddenly angry with Emmett. "Even if Emmett was sorry, he didn't do anything to make up for it, the way the guy her mother knew had, the guy who killed the whole family" (205). Sam refers to Irene's account discussed above regarding a man in Public Relations, who coping with his Vietnam War experiences, moves toward what Irene considers a productive life. Sam's responds to her father's diary by gathering some supplies in order to "really

face the wild” of Cawood’s pond so that she can attempt to proximate the experience of living, if not fighting, in the jungle. Finally, the Vietnam War she confronts in her father’s diary pushes Sam to flee, and in this instance to become like Emmett: a wandering, nomad veteran. Critics, such as O’Brien, observe that this is a paradoxical action for Sam. Disgusted by her father’s account of the Vietnam experience, Sam reaches for an approximation of it. Repulsed by her father’s “unsavory internal experience of the war,” Sam escapes to an environment that is her equivalent to being “in country,” Cawood’s pond (O’Brien 49). She attempts to enact the experience in order to come to terms with it, wondering if she would feel and act the same under similar circumstances. Sam’s attempt to recreate a Vietnam War experience brings her closer to reactions we see veterans have—defense mechanisms become compulsive repetition, alienating the individual from connecting with the larger community.

Running away, Sam tries to return to a time and place she has never been—the Vietnam War. She imagines she is in Vietnam, yet the security of her world complicates her desire to capture the experience of the Vietnam War. For example, Sam lists the dangers she faces—snakes, sinkholes, possibly a rapist. Her relative safety interrupts her fantasy. Sam realizes that the soldiers in Vietnam, unlike her approximation of Vietnam, had no means of escape. She understands that she can escape her situation. At one particular moment Sam thinks she sees another person. “She could see movement through the weeds...she saw a face, a face with beady eyes. It scared her. It was a V.C. Then she saw a sharp nose and streaks around the eyes. It

was a raccoon” (213). As she tries to imagine herself into a dangerous situation to test her reaction and ability to survive, the reality of this impossibility shows its face—she does not see another person, and certainly not an enemy—she sees only a raccoon. Despite this undeniable failure to reenact the experience of her father or uncle when dawn approaches, Sam repeatedly thinks to herself that “she had survived” (215-16). When she hears someone approaching, she tries to fashion a weapon from a can while feeling pleasure at her terror. This adrenaline rush soon fades as she realizes that she is safe and all will be back to normal in a moment. The person she hears is, of course, Emmett walking toward her. He is angry that she ran away and throws her failure in her face.

I know why you were out here. You think you can go through what we went through out in the jungle, but you can't. This place is scary and things can happen to you, but it's not the same as having snipers and mortar fire and shells and people shooting at you from behind bushes. What have you got to be afraid of? (220)

Sam's failure is inevitable; nevertheless, her actions prompt Emmett to talk about Vietnam.

The experience Emmett recounts will remind us of *Paco's Story*. Emmett recounts a firefight where he is the sole survivor. Lying under another man's body while the enemy comes through inspecting the dead, Emmett is unable to contact air support and must wait for the enemy to leave the area; he does not escape until the following day. This image of the single survivor “playing dead,” often trapped under another body, recurs in Vietnam War stories. Sam affirms the familiarity of this story, saying “I saw something like that in a movie on TV” (223). Similar to the image of

the last chopper lifting off the U.S. Embassy in Saigon, this common narrative includes an element of disbelief, yet illustrates another instance of repetition. Emmett powerfully describes the scene, emphasizing the reality of death, rather than the fact that he was the only survivor. He explains that what happened to him was unlike the movie Sam remembers. "It really happened...That smell—the smell of death...The smell of warm blood in the jungle heat, like soup coming to a boil" (223). This emphasis on sense of smell also echoes the medic's description of Paco's experience. Emmett finally tells of his traumatic experience. Emmett fixates on the smell; smell is something that is impossible to describe, but he can communicate that the smell was bad. This smell accounts for the horror of the situation. It is important for Sam, and for us, to hear this account, because death, especially in war as it is somehow justified, is so far removed from the experiences of the larger community. Outside war, death is often clean: bodies are quickly removed and quietly taken care of; they are not lying on or around us decaying. Emmett must tell of his experience so that we have a greater understanding of the traumatic proximity to death in war.

Soon after returning home from Cawood's pond, Emmett decides they are going to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C. Suddenly energetic, Emmett orchestrates the trip, convinces Mrs. Hughes to go with them, and seems determined to put his life in order by getting a job and paying the V.A. money he owed them for his unsuccessful attempt at college. Once he realizes that Sam's search for Vietnam leads her to reenact his compulsive, repetitive behavior, he decides to take action. "It was as though Emmett had found the bird he wanted to see" (230). This

instance, however, differs from Emmett's search for the Egret, because his efforts are not futile and his goals attainable.

Memorial plays a significant role of destination in *In Country*. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C., in this novel, represents a place of reflection, a community gathering place, and reinforces the argument that the Vietnam Generation is intergenerational. The first line of the novel interrupts the journey to the Wall when Mrs. Hughes says, "I have to stop again" (3). The novel begins at the end of the summer and partway through the trip to D.C. Many delays prevent a perfect linear movement from Kentucky to Washington D.C. After this first short section of the novel, Mason backs the narrative up to the start of the summer before the trip to the memorial. Once the trip to the Wall begins, the disruptions continue. This "I have to stop again" is Mrs. Hughes' frequent request--whether it be to use the restroom, take her medication, or relieve her swelling legs. In addition to her grandmother's interruptions, Sam's car breaks down, and they must wait several days before moving on. Delay and suspension interrupt this journey, and Sam's apprehension grows. She wishes "the car repair would take forever. Sam dreads going to Washington" (20). These are the last lines of a very brief Part One of the novel. Part Two moves the story back to the start of the summer, and the narrative of the journey to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is delayed while we learn what occurs through the Summer until the trip to Washington resumes in Part Three, the end of *In Country*. These narrative delays and interruptions become a way the novel's form represents the aftermath of the Vietnam War. Movement toward recuperation does not have a clear linear

structure, like this text, repetition, delay and interruption are all part of recovery. The form, as we will also see with Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, reflects the novel's thematic concerns.

As the three finally approach the memorial, a sense of anxiety sweeps across them. They cannot get there quickly enough; Mrs. Hughes complains that she can't see the memorial; Sam wants to run but is not sure if she wants to move toward or away from the Wall. The memorial is first described as a "massive, black gash in a hillside, like a vein of coal exposed and polished with polyurethane" (239). The narrator describes the memorial through Sam's perspective, using the language of Kentucky with a reference to coal mines. Yet again, in this language, the thread of excavation reappears in the coal mine simile.

Upon first seeing the memorial, Sam resists and is angered. "It is like a giant grave, fifty-eight thousand bodies rotting here behind those names. The people are streaming past, down into the pit" (239). Such a response to the Wall is not unusual. In response to criticism of the memorial's design by veteran's groups, the government added soldiers in bronze nearby a couple years after the dedication of the wall, and after the publication of *In Country*. Critique of the design includes this idea that it looks like a grave, many dislike that it is black, in the shape of a V and many more are angry because the Wall is placed below ground. "'It don't show up good,' Mamaw says anxiously. 'It's just a hole in the ground'" (239).

Sam's experience at the memorial centers on the way people interact with the Wall. Here again, we have a community. "A woman in a sunhat...A spraddle-legged

guy in camouflage...with a cane...a group of school kids...two uniformed marines” (240-42). This diverse but not unexpected group of people exhibit a variety of reactions. “A woman bends down and straightens a ribbon on a wreath...A handwritten note apologizes to one of the names for abandoning him in a fire fight...[the two marines] read [a] name and both look abruptly away...then walk briskly off” (241-42). Despite varied responses, these people are all at the Wall for a similar reason--to remember the dead.

But memorials do not simply provide remembrance by their mere existence. They must provide more reflection than memorials that Donald Rignalda terms “self-sufficient” (237). They should not simply remain in their space, but should somehow exceed that space. If observers are obliged to become participants, they will more likely will take remembrance with them when they leave the space of the memorial. Like the presence of veterans, such a memorial obligates the community to remember the war, and recognize their responsibility for the war’s aftermath. Mia Lin’s design of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is a good example of a memorial that demands more of the visitors. Because the names are not listed alphabetically, the memorial demands participation, visitors must actively seek out the name(s) they came to see. It forces observers to see their own reflection, and the reflection of those around them in the Wall. It reflects a larger historical context in its reflection of the Washington Monument, and Lincoln Memorial. This encourages thought of history and prompts questions concerning beginnings and endings. Such a memorial obligates participants to bear witness to the horrors of war and condemn its immorality. Only after coming

to terms with the immorality of war can we hope to partially repair the damaged psyche.

Some criticize the memorial for being too sober, “just a hole in the ground” and therefore not properly honoring the dead. Others complain that the memorial is cut into the side of a knoll making it nearly invisible: it “doesn’t show up good.” Despite these criticisms, the memorial is not entirely negative. It does not arrange names alphabetically, so visitors must interact with it. The names do, however, appear chronologically. This chronology imposes a linear narrative structure on the Vietnam War that, in the experience, does not exist. Beginnings, endings, and occurrences of the Vietnam War evade simple sequence in their ambiguity. Chronology coupled with both the physical dimensions and form of the monument provides the viewer with a familiar narrative pattern. In the shape of a V, the memorial begins quite low to the ground increasing in size as it reaches the peak year of deaths, 1968. This is the center of the monument, the highest point, and the meeting points of the two sides of the V. The other side of the memorial slopes downward again ending low to the ground. This represents a typical narrative structure: rising action from 1954-1968, climax at 1968, and dénouement from 1968-1975.

Some who believed the memorial demeans the honor of American soldiers who died in the Vietnam War were appeased by the addition of the heroic bronze soldiers placed nearby. This battle over the myth of heroism, however, is not why I see difficulties in the representation of the Vietnam War in this memorial. The Wall *does* struggle to overcome this myth, and is positive in its attempts to do so.

Conversely, the memorial fails in its representation by impressing upon such an ambiguous war, this comfortable narrative structure of beginnings and endings; yet as we can see from Mason's representation of the memorial, it has much to offer in its representation of the Vietnam War as a moment in history dependant upon reflection.

When they ultimately reach the memorial, both Sam and her grandmother see themselves when they see the wall. Mrs. Hughes says, "All I can see here is my reflection" (244). At this moment, the grandmother identifies with the Vietnam Generation when she sees her reflection in The Wall. This family experiences what Rignalda suggests is positive about this memorial: it demands interaction (237). They search the directory for the name, and need to ask for a ladder so they can touch the name and Emmett must sit near a low panel to read names he was searching for. After looking at her father's name on the war, Sam returns to the directory accidentally finding her name there as she scans the all the Hughes' names. When she touches her name on the Wall, she thinks, "How odd it feels, as though all the names in America have been used to decorate this wall" (245). Seeing her name there makes Sam realize the impact the Vietnam War has on not only her small community of those who've come in contact with veterans, but also the entire nation. Sam's assumption that the Wall must be filled with all the names in America also reflects the participation all the people in America had in the Vietnam War.

Sam's reaction to the children at the memorial brings her search for Vietnam full circle. A girl asks,

[a]re they piled on top of each other?...What are all these names anyway?...Sam feels like punching the girl in the face. How could anyone that

age not know? But she realizes that she doesn't know either. She is just beginning to understand. And she will never know what happened to all these men in the war. (240).

The limits of her understanding become something Sam can now acknowledge. She is no longer being told by outside authority (veterans) that she will never understand; rather, Sam recognizes the necessity for being conscious of the limits of understanding. This is essential because part of the Vietnam experience, for many, is that it is beyond complete comprehension. This is why we see so many examples of compulsive searching and digging throughout the novel.

The question of this last scene, however, is the seemingly simple happy ending. Have these three people, each representing a different generation of the now expanded Vietnam Generation, come to the Wall, and somehow made peace with Vietnam? Consider the very last lines of the text describing Emmett after finding the panel where the names of his comrades would be: "Silently, Sam points to the place where Emmett is studying the names low on a panel. He is sitting there cross-legged in front of the wall, and slowly his face bursts into a smile like flames" (245). He is smiling, yet it is a "smile like flames." It may seem that this is a simple, happy ending, nevertheless this scene is more complicated than presenting simple, complete recovery.

We view Emmett's response from a distance as Sam points to where he sits by a lower panel and "slowly his face bursts into a smile like flames." (245). Various readings of this ending range from accusing Mason of blind optimism—that Emmett's reaction to the memorial mean he has achieved complete closure (Johnson). Others

acknowledge the ambiguity of these closing lines; we have no commentary from Sam or the narrator concerning Emmett's reaction (Dwyer). O'Brien sees this ending as an indication that Emmett experience *some* healing and that the close of the novel is forward-looking. Some critics (Greybill and Gunn) read these lines as an indication that Emmett is experiencing rebirth: they compare his smile like flames to the phoenix rising from the ashes. Although this is an interesting reading, the language reminds us of the phoenixes destination—to fall again. The phoenix does not, as the critics suggest, indicate a heroic rising from the ashes as that rising always precedes repetitive burning and falling. Such language echoes descriptions of the battlefield-- *bursts* and *flames* suggest an explosion. An implosion occurs in the oxymoron *slowly bursts*. This phrasing collapses in on itself in its contradictions. A "smile like flames" cannot be one of complete joy, because it echoes too poignantly destruction. So we cannot conclude that *In Country* has an effortless happy ending, but rather that the ending is complicated by paradoxes of recovery and residual effects. This does not mean that the ending holds no hope for recovery. Represented in battlefield images, the ending reminds us that in these cases of severe trauma, no cure or cathartic moment allows us to forget, but that moments such as this succeed providing a glimpse at remembrance.

Chapter Three

The Things They Carried: Survival, Repetition and Representation

Tim O'Brien struggles to represent trauma throughout *The Things They Carried*, yet he enters into the debate about how this might be accomplished most deliberately in his chapter, "How to Tell a True War Story." He writes in this chapter, "[a] true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe" (78). Truth becomes central here, as does the impossibility of glory, or recovery. "If at the end of a story you feel uplifted," he says, "or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old terrible lie" (68-69). He believes that there is no virtue or rectitude in a war story, and therefore none in war. In order to avoid this false sense of inspiration, the reader must work to gain a greater understanding when reading *The Things They Carried*. Narrated by Tim O'Brien, the author's fictional double, this collection constructed from a pastiche of plot fragments punctuated by reflection on these plots demands the reader piece together the traumatic experience.

Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, like *Paco's Story* and *In County*, deals with the ways individuals and communities cope with severe trauma of the Vietnam War. However, this text enhances the study of Aftermath Vietnam War literature with a self-conscious meditation on the problems and possibilities of representing traumas of the Vietnam War. *The Things They Carried* explores the nature of trauma, alienation, and relationships between individuals and communities after traumatic occurrences. It asks how and why we can and should represent

traumas of the Vietnam War. These stories present the experiences of the narrator Tim and the soldiers he met in Vietnam. The narrator's direct discussion of how to represent the Vietnam War and its aftermath opens a much-needed reflection on the relationship of form and theme. He questions memory, truth, and the extent we are able to witness and represent traumatic moments. As such, *The Things They Carried* is one of O'Brien's most self-conscious explorations of representation. In this text, O'Brien describes how traumatized individuals represent their experiences to the larger community. He explores the alienation of those who are unable to fully represent traumatic moments, and the ways repetition and failure become responses to these incidents. Although many severe trauma experiences exceed representation, O'Brien argues that we need to struggle to express them nonetheless. Only by telling and retelling of traumatic moments can we hope to come closer to representing trauma so that such horror will not be forgotten and will not be repeated. We can recount trauma easily enough through facts, but this recounting lacks the appropriate emotional response and that lack drives repetitive behavior. Compulsive repetition guides us toward, at a minimum, these purposes: bearing witness to horrors of the war, condemning the immorality of war, implicating the larger community's participation in war, remembering the dead, and beginning to repair the damaged psyche.

The Things They Carried explores relations between individual soldiers/veterans and the larger community at three crucial moments in war experiences. In the first instance, the character/narrator, Tim O'Brien, struggles with

the decision to go to Vietnam after receiving his draft notice. The second moment occurs during the war when soldiers attempt to communicate with the civilian population back in the United States. The third moment unfolds when the war is over and the soldiers have returned and attempt to cope with alienation.

In an early chapter, "On the Rainy River," set in pre-Vietnam America, Tim gives an account of running away after getting his draft notice. Tim considers dodging the draft, but concludes that he must go to war because he fears the community's reaction if he does not go. This community consists of his family, namely his parents, but also the small town in which he lives and the larger American society. Yet, he feels alienated by his decision to participate in the war. The larger society does not hold the same doubts about the war. They are sold on the myths of war and believe that the purpose is just, that soldiers are brave, that those (Americans) who die in warfare are heroes. O'Brien reflects, "[f]or more than twenty years I've had to live with it, feeling the shame, trying to push it away, and so by this act of remembrance, by putting the facts down on paper, I am hoping to relieve at least some of the pressure on my dreams" (39). He is ashamed because he fights without believing, and he writes as a way to expose that shame. The purpose of this reflection is to uncover the myths of war and the guilt of participation and survival.

After receiving his draft notice, Tim flees, driving north. Before reaching the Canadian border, he stops and stays at an empty fishing resort for nearly two weeks, contemplating fleeing to Canada. The story culminates with his indecision on the river between Canada and America. The old man with whom Tim stays seems to

understand his dilemma without speaking of it and one day takes him fishing, stopping the boat a few yards from Canada. Faced with this opportunity of fleeing the United States, Tim halts: “[P]aralysis ...took my heart. A moral freeze: I couldn’t decide, I couldn’t act, I couldn’t comport myself with even a pretense of modest human dignity” (57). His moral conflict leads to paralysis. This inability to act may sound familiar; it occurs with both Paco and Emmett. This paralysis leads to a loss of self that differs from the loss of self trauma victims sustain after experiencing the inability to witness trauma. In this instance, moral conflict prompts Tim’s passivity. Tim wonders at his paralysis: “[His] whole life seemed to spill out into the river, swirling away from me, everything [he] had ever been or ever wanted to be” (58). He loses his past self in a strange hallucination that melds past, present, and future into a moment of identity crisis.

I saw my parents calling me from the shoreline. I saw my brother and sister, all the townsfolk, the mayor and the entire chamber of Commerce and all my old teachers and girlfriends and high school buddies...A marching band played fight songs. All my aunts and uncles were there, and Abraham Lincoln, and Saint George...and several members of the United States Senate...LBJ, and Huck Finn, and Abbie Hoffman, and all the dead soldiers back from the grave, and the many thousands who were later to die...a million ferocious citizens all waving flags of all shapes and colors. (58-59)

The community expands and contracts as he lists people in his family, his town, “Anytown” America, the government, religious leaders, soldiers, the dead; all signify American ideals. Not only do we have expanding community circles in this hallucination, we also have the convergence of past, present and future. O’Brien argues that this is one of the ways we can represent traumatic moments because

trauma exists outside the bounds of linear time. "On the Rainy River" concludes with Tim going to war because he was "embarrassed not to go"(59). "I survived, but it's not a happy ending. I was a coward. I went to the war" (61). He calls himself a coward because he was too afraid of disappointing and being ridiculed by society.

The next story of struggle between the individual and community is set in Vietnam. In this chapter, "How to Tell a True War Story," several soldiers send letters to people in the United States. Rat Kiley writes to Curt Lemon's sister after Curt dies while he and Rat are playing catch with a smoke grenade and Curt steps on a mine. This letter is written with good intentions; however, looking at the language of the letter, we can easily see why Curt's sister did not respond. Rat tells her of Curt fishing with grenades, and how he made war fun because he was always "lighting up villes [villages] and bringing smoke to bear every which way" (68). In addition to these glimpses of Curt's behavior in Vietnam, Rat details a story of Curt's mad conduct. "On Halloween, this real hot spooky night, the dude paints up his body all different colors and puts on this weird mask and hikes over to a ville and goes trick-or-treating almost stark naked, just boots and balls and an M-16" (68). This account shows that the combat zone, a place of insanity, is ruled by standards unacceptable to the general public. Obviously this attempt to communicate with the civilized world through Curt's sister was a failure.

Mitchell Sanders provides another instance of failed communication in his letter to the Ohio draft board. It is not actually a letter, but rather an envelope filled with lice with the word FREE written in the top right-hand corner. O'Brien mentions

this briefly in passing, as if it were not unusual to send an envelope of lice to the draft board. Sanders wants to send them a bit of his Vietnam experience--the daily discomfort, but also to send them a message regarding waste and disregard for human life. He is sending lice to America, just as the draft board sent young men (lice) to Vietnam. The draft board represents the larger society who sends men into war as if they were lice.

The final, and more familiar, example of a rift between the individual and community is veteran Norman Bowker's story in "Speaking of Courage" and "Notes." Like Paco and Emmett, after the war, Norman's struggles with alienation and guilt. On the afternoon of the Fourth of July, Norman repeatedly circles the lake near his hometown, contemplating what he wishes he could tell his father, or his former girlfriend, about his experiences in Vietnam. Through Norman's meaningless repetition, the author gives insight into the desire to communicate. Norman does not simply experience repetition, but makes frustrated attempts to break through the repetition. Like Emmett, Norman has returned to his hometown. Circling the lake, Norman sees people out on the lake, passes young boys hiking with toy guns, and picnickers waiting for fireworks. As he observes all this, he feels a rift driven by the differences between himself (soldier) and this seemingly happy community (citizens).

Repetition plays a key role in both Norman's actions and the form of the narrative. Circling the lake, Norman passes the same people and places again and again, each time reporting on what they are doing, and often noting that they are still doing the same thing. He notices a sprinkler in someone's yard. "Hopelessly, round

and round, a rotating sprinkler scattered lake water” (146). This sprinkler calls attention to Norman’s hopeless circular motion, as he observes in a letter that prompts O’Brien to write this story. “[T]here’s no place to go. Not just in this lousy little town. In general. My life, I mean. It’s almost like I got killed over in Nam” (156). In his hopeless circularity, Norman, like Emmett of *In Country*, has no place to go; no place will restore their lost identities.

One scene does interrupt the circular repetition of Norman’s actions in this story. His stop at the A&W drive-in reveals his position as an outsider in this community. Soon after pulling up for service, Norman honks his horn at a server who ignores him, continuing to talk with friends. “He felt invisible” (151). Norman honks again; the girl approaches, asking “[y]ou blind?” and shows him how to use the intercom. Norman is distant from this society, and receives confusing messages. The interaction that follows is interesting because the voice on the other side of the intercom uses language reminiscent of radio communications; a language Norman likely became familiar with in Vietnam. After Norman orders the voice replies, “[a]ffirmative, copy clear. No rootie-tootie?” (151). Norman doesn’t understand that the voice means root beer. This misunderstanding, however, does not suppress his need to tell his story. When the voice tells him to loosen up, and asks what he really needs, Norman starts to tell his war story, but stops himself mid-sentence. “There was nothing to say...If it had been possible, which it wasn’t, he would have explained how his friend Kiowa slipped away that night beneath the dark swampy field” (153). The

impossibility of explaining this moment prompts Norman to imagine what it would be like if he did attempt to speak of it.

Norman imagines talking to Sally, a former girlfriend: “if Sally had not been married, or if his father were not such a baseball fan, it would have been a good time to talk” (141). His desire to talk about the war frustrates him, “[h]e wouldn’t say anything about anything...and he would not say a word about how he’d almost won the Silver Star for valor” (140). He wouldn’t say anything about this, not because he wishes he had won the medal, or because medals hold any significance for him, but rather because the story of almost winning the medal is a story of failing to save another’s life, and it is this loss of life that is impossible to fully articulate.

Norman’s desire to speak of his experience, however, motivates him to imagine a conversation with his father. This conversation centers on Norman almost getting a medal for *uncommon* valor, in addition to his seven other medals for *common* valor. He imagines his father’s reaction to the story he wants to tell of the night in Vietnam when he and his comrades set up camp in a field of muck. We learn rather quickly that what appears to be a muddy field is actually the village toilet—a field of feces. This is the setting for the central traumatic moment in the text. As mortar shells pound the field, the mud shifts and swells enveloping the men.

The field was boiling...all those years of waste...he heard somebody screaming. It was Kiowa...in the glow he saw Kiowa’s wide-open eyes settling down into the scum...He could not describe what happened next, not ever, but he would’ve tried anyway. He would’ve spoken carefully so as to make it real for anyone who would listen. There were bubbles where Kiowa’s head should’ve been...He pulled hard but Kiowa was gone, and then suddenly he felt himself going, too...the stink was everywhere—it was inside him, in his

lungs—and he could no longer tolerate it...He released Kiowa's boot and watched it slide away...He was alone. (149)

The traumatic moment in this passage eludes articulation; the moment of death cannot be isolated. Norman imagines his father suggesting that Kiowa was “already gone,” but Norman disputes this, unable to free himself from the guilt of letting go, of giving up.

Norman's reaction to this moment and his desire to speak it despite his inevitable failure to do so coincide with trauma theory previously outlined—the impossibility of completely knowing or communicating the traumatic moment. “He could not describe what happened next, not ever, but he would've tried anyway.” Despite inevitable failure, Norman realizes that he must try to articulate. This is the primary reason we see these veteran characters compulsively repeat. Norman's story of Kiowa is an example of one person's response to death.

Repetition as a reaction to witnessing death stems from the impossibility of fully witnessing or representing severely traumatic moments. The account of Tim killing a Vietnamese soldier with a grenade, like Norman's story, appears in two adjacent chapters midway through the collection. Both chapters include repetition. Tim describes dead man's eyes several times in “The Man I Killed.” “His one eye was shut, and the other was a star-shaped hole” (126). This phrase changes each time it is repeated: “Star shaped hole” and “one eye was a star”(126,129, 130). Internally, Tim the narrator, describes what the man looks like, and imagines what kind of life he led. His silence is quite noticeable compared with Kiowa's frantic speech. Kiowa

tells him several times to stop staring, that it was a question of survival, that this was war, that the man would have been killed by someone else, that it was unavoidable and basically to forget about it and move on. Silence disturbs Kiowa. “Why not talk about it?...Come on, man, talk” (130). The narrator describes again, “one eye was shut. The other was a star-shaped hole” (130). Silence, and Kiowa repeats “[t]alk” (130). Tim doesn’t say a word until the next chapter “Ambush.”

In “Ambush” Tim’s description of the Vietnamese soldier recurs. This account, however, is told not in the present of the moment, but after the incident. This chapter functions as a backward looking narration. Here we get a fuller narration of what happened before and after Tim throws the grenade, and we have still more repetition. Tim speculates again on the man’s life, and describes his eye yet again as a “star-shaped hole” (133). Presenting the story of the “Man [he] Killed” in two chapters disrupts the usual order of narration. Disorder and fragments in addition to the repetition make the account more comprehensive as the reader moves through the text, but the account is never complete. To represent trauma in this manner speaks for the difficulty of relating trauma in chronological order. Witnesses do not experience trauma as such, but rather in O’Brien’s disjointed writing style.

O’Brien’s description of Curt Lemon’s death is also confirms Caruth’s discussion of what occurs during a traumatic moment, namely the impossibility of witnessing that moment. O’Brien writes,

...it’s difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen. What seemed to happen becomes its own happening and had to be told that way. The angles of vision are skewed. When a booby trap explodes, you close your eyes and duck and float outside yourself. When a guy dies, like Curt Lemon,

you look away and then look back for a moment and then look away again. The pictures get jumbled; you tend to miss a lot. And then afterward, when you go to tell about it, there is always that surreal *seemingness*, which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it *seemed*. (*seemingness* emphasis mine 71)

The question of truth plays a vital role in O'Brien's work. In moments of severe trauma, such as these, a loss of identity occurs and you "float outside yourself." What seemed to happen has its own truth because this is what one can communicate—the way the moment seemed. "[Y]ou look away" and can never entirely witness the moment. The truth of that traumatic moment is the failure to capture that moment. There is a moral obligation to try and represent events so horrific that they cannot be fully witnessed.

Reflecting this moral obligation, reactions to Ted Lavender's death take on many forms. Ted dies at an odd moment of relief. Just as another soldier appears from inspecting a tunnel after a tense delay, the soldiers whoop with excitement, both because the soldier made it out of the tunnel and because they would not be the next to go in to search for him. At this very moment Ted returns from relieving himself and a sniper shoots him. Kiowa explains how Lavender dies, "I swear to God—boom, down. Not a word" (17). Struck with disbelief, he repeats this phrase "boom-down." Other soldiers joke, "zapped while zipping" (17). O'Brien explains such repetition. "There it is, they'd say. Over and over—there it is my friend, there it is as if the repetition itself were an act of poise, a balance between crazy and almost crazy" (21). O'Brien understands the importance of this repetition, despite the precarious position the speaker may be in. He argues, "[y]ou can tell a true war story if you just keep

telling it” (85). Repetition accounts for the need and effort to speak of trauma in order to better represent such moments because repetition signifies the incomplete nature of the process of telling that in turn indicates that something so awful, beyond articulation, has occurred.

In order to represent trauma, soldiers repeat violent episodes. After Lavender is shot, the entire troop wreaks havoc on a village unprovoked: “They burned everything. They shot chickens and dogs, they trashed the village well, they called in artillery and watched the wreckage” (16). They respond to violence with futile aggression. They cannot seek revenge on the sniper, so they attack what they can see, the village. An additional instance of such futile aggression is Rat’s torture of a baby water buffalo after Curt Lemon’s death. After offering the buffalo some food, Rat sporadically shoots the animal everywhere but the head or the chest in order to make the animal suffer. This action “wasn’t to kill; it was to hurt” (78-79).

O’Brien chooses memorial both to represent trauma and to attain a sense of closure--to end the war. In “Field Trip,” Tim returns to Vietnam with his daughter, and seeks out the field where Kiowa died. Surprised at the ordinary, non-threatening atmosphere of the field, Tim performs a kind of memorial for Kiowa. He wades into the mucky stream with Kiowa’s moccasins near where he believes Kiowa went under. Immersing himself in the water in a baptismal scene, Tim pushes Kiowa’s moccasins into the muck. He “tried to think of something decent to say, something meaningful and right, but nothing came” (186). Finally, he says, “[t]here it is,” the same phrase the soldiers repeatedly used to explain death (186). Despite his inability to say

anything more “meaningful,” his simple phrase, in its repetition, becomes more meaningful than something more sentimental could have possibly been, because it demonstrates the limits of language. Through this makeshift memorial ceremony, Tim finds a limited closure. Through this baptism like cleansing he is able to say goodbye to a lost friend and to the circumstances of his death: “In a way, maybe, I’d gone under with Kiowa, and now after two decades I’d finally worked my way out...the war was over” (187). This makeshift memorial is temporal and more private than a public memorial such as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C. We may reach a false sense of closure after Tim performs his memorial. He says “the war was over,” but the placement of this memorial in the novel indicates otherwise. Three chapters follow this, signifying that O’Brien, although having found possibility for some closure, is not capable of being finished with his Vietnam War experiences. He may write that the war was over, but he continues writing, telling even more powerful stories.

Finally, O’Brien’s discussion of why he writes solidifies his central argument—that writing is key to dealing with trauma. He has acknowledged the impossibility of finding an absolute truth, but finds partial truth in the *seemingness* of a traumatic event. He feels that this *seemingness* attests to the impossibility of ever fully rendering that moment, and that impossibility is the truth. This impossibility does not mean, however, that we should abandon attempts to articulate trauma, but rather that we must continue trying to represent severe trauma. The form of *The Things They Carried* reflects this challenge. The various stories are linked but

interdependent; often, narration of a death will be rewritten in another part of the text. Sometimes we have simple reiteration, other times, the story changes—details may be added, or the narrator may revise the account, saying that the event did not occur as previously narrated. Critics such as Catherine Calloway notice the importance of this “technique that actively engages the readers in the process of textual creation” (253). Such a form demands the reader participate in piecing the stories together (Calloway 254). In this case, participation does not indicate catharsis, as the participation in itself does not make everything clear, but rather the reader experiences a kind of fragmentary confusion. This creates an experience similar to the interactive memorial discussed in the previous chapter. Just as in the case of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C., the form does not permit passive observation, but forces the larger community to participate in reconstructing the horrors of war. The goal of representing traumas of the Vietnam War in this fashion is to create enough of an impact so that citizens will exhaust all other options before permitting the violence of war, and so that they will understand the implications of their participation in war. This impact will occur as the participant pieces together the *seemingness* of the traumatic experience. This is part of the process of sense making, a way to attain these moments of possibility to represent the *seemingness* of an event.

For example, through writing, O’Brien finds that we can bring the dead to life, and therefore come closer to facing the traumatic moment. “The thing about a story is...[that] memory and imagination and language combine to make spirits in the head. There is the illusion of aliveness” (230). Critics, such as Chen, argue, “death of the

human body...generates [O'Brien's] fiction" (88). Just as in the case of the father, outlined in chapter one, who dreams of his son, O'Brien writes (rather than dreams) to "ke[ep] the dead alive" (239).

Without considering O'Brien's earlier discussion concerning truth, one may think that writing, for O'Brien, is the ultimate cure. This, however, cannot be the case. His realization that the *seemingness* of a traumatic experience is as close to the truth as we can reach, indicates that he must not believe in such absolutes as truth or cure. What it seems he believes and argues for is the hopeful possibilities of capturing the *seemingness* of a situation. This is not a negative failure; it is a positive failure as in it we *fail better*. Near the close of *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien recounts a dreamed conversation where the dead likens herself to being inside a book. "It's up on a library shelf, so you're safe and everything, but the book hasn't been checked out for a long time. All you can do is wait. Just hope somebody'll pick it up and start reading" (245). This sounds rather romantic; yet consider what she says about safety. To deny its existence, or its story is to turn away from the difficulty of reading the story, of attempting—even if the effort means failure—to understand.

Conclusion

Due to our inability to ever fully witness severe traumatic moments and therefore our inability to ever fully represent such moments, all attempts to completely overcome trauma will be fraught with failure and frustration. Despite inevitable failure, the struggle will be worthwhile because it will help us to continually attempt to represent what O'Brien calls the *seemingness* of the traumatic event. Aftermath Vietnam War literature—specifically *Paco's Story*, *In Country*, and *The Things They Carried*--aids us in this struggle through providing examples of compulsive repetition in its form and themes. These examples of compulsive repetition reveal the possibility of partial healing because they direct us toward bearing witness to horrors of the war, condemning the immorality of war, remembering the dead, and repairing the damaged psyche. These texts offer ways to represent trauma through delay, repetition, and memorial.

With postponed endings, the effects of trauma are delayed; therefore, recuperation is postponed, and endings are not final. The Fall of Saigon with the image of the *last huey* lifting off the United States Embassy signifies this delay. This helicopter indicates a delayed ending, since United States' involvement in the war *officially* ended in 1973, two years before the Fall of Saigon. This image is famous as media attempt to capture in visual terms the delayed ending of the war.

The most effective narrative forms representing the Vietnam War are not linear, but riddled with delay and repetition. Part of this delay is repetition stemming

from the inability to verbalize trauma. We see this occur in each text. Paco, in his passivity is incapable of telling his story. Recall that he has tried to answer the question everyone asks, “what is the cane for,” or in other words, “what is wrong with you?” He distills his story down into one skeleton phrase: “wounded in the war.” Since Paco cannot even speak his trauma to himself, or for the reader, the medic tells his story. When the medic tells Paco’s story, the medic emphasizes his own subjective point of view. This retelling becomes a story of what happened to the medic and how he could not tolerate what he witnessed. Repetition becomes exponential as Paco’s trauma also becomes the medic’s trauma.

Like to Paco’s paralysis, Emmitt’s passivity stems from his inability to articulate his Vietnam War experiences. When Emmett does act, he merely repeats the impossible search to recapture or relive trauma. Like Emmett, Norman has nowhere to go. Norman’s repetitive circling represents his inability to speak. Yet, Norman consciously desires to speak his trauma. When he tries, both in reality and in his imagination, he realizes the impossibility of this task. Despite the impossibility, Norman, like O’Brien, will still try to articulate the trauma of war. O’Brien finds a solution to this dilemma; the *seemingness* of an event is what we can speak, and this is where we find truth. It is impossible to ever fully articulate the traumatic moment, but that we must continue to try, because of the moral obligation to remember in order to prevent recurrence, remaining hopeful and speaking the moment as it seemingly occurred.

These texts offer several different forms and functions of memorial. The texts themselves, most explicitly *The Things They Carried*, function as memorial. *Paco's Story* incorporates an imagined monument, *In Country* describes the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (monument), and *The Things They Carried* describes a make-shift memorial of performance. Memorials, whether written or constructed, must be interactive, avoid closure, and not impose false coherence. These texts offer examples of memorials that meet some of these criteria.

From necessary failure comes a movement beyond that failure. Jesse's suggestion for a monument in *Paco's Story* offers a circular, interactive space, yet relies on mimetic values to make its argument about how to best represent the war. The marble crater filled with blood, money, and manure only symbolizes what Jesse believes the Vietnam War represents, but also a comments on memorial. Imagining such a fantastical, unrealistic memorial, Jesse shares his frustration with the impossibility of memorializing war. He suggests the failure of the false heroism found in bronze memorials. By contrast, his imagined monument embodies chaos.

The Wall in Washington D.C., may impose order on the chaos of war by listing the names chronologically, yet the chronology does not dispel the ineffability of the event. As represented in *In Country*, this memorial also presents an alternative to the false heroism of soldiers cast in bronze. Reflection and interaction are key aspects of this memorial. These elements involve changing observers into participants. Memorial in *The Things They Carried* also require participation. The memorial O'Brien creates by placing Kiowa's moccasins in the water near the place Kiowa died,

however, seems to provide a partial sense of closure. O'Brien, can now leave that death, memory, and memorial in that place. This memorial is not static, however, because he placed the moccasins in a place of flux, a river. Writing, too, is a form of memorial in O'Brien's text. In suggesting that we can represent what seems to happen in traumatic moments through writing, O'Brien's fragmentary work resists a clear, linear narrative, opening the process of representation to reflection.

Michael Herr writes in *Dispatches*, "Vietnam. We've all been there." This text certainly expanded the Vietnam Generation and experience to include those who were back in the United States during the war. Herr suggests that the map of Vietnam is like an inverted map of California--that the cultural dissonance occurring in the United States was exported to Vietnam. Claiming the Vietnam experience is intergenerational may prompt us to overlook the different ways these generations experience the Vietnam War. These differences are manifest in *In Country*: Emmett experiences the Vietnam through his personal history and memories; Sam inherits Vietnam through the loss of her father and living with Emmett; Mrs. Hughes becomes familiar with the Vietnam War experience through the loss of her son. By expanding the Vietnam Generation to include more than just the soldiers who participated, we make an effort to reconcile combatants with civilians, or individuals with communities. This helps us understand how the larger community can be complicit during times of war.

In addition to helping us better understanding how symptoms of severe trauma are represented in Aftermath Vietnam War literature, these texts offer new ways to

continue trying to represent such trauma—by pushing the boundaries of narrative and memorial. This study should also help us understand the current desire to understand causes and to feel the consequences of war as they are played out in the media through reality television, and, more potently, in the live coverage of our current wars. Real-time coverage of our current wars accounts both for this desire and the impossibility of attaining this desire. What we have in these instances is part of the search to get closer to the moment that continues to elude.

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