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Gesturing beyond the Frame: Transnational Trauma and US War Fiction

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Just as the “matter” of bodies cannot appear without a shaping and animating form, neither can the “matter” of war appear without a conditioning and facilitating form or frame.

—Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?*

The kaleidoscopic transnational remapping of American literary studies over the past decade offers an as-yet unfulfilled opportunity for a reappraisal of American war literature. The need to develop this promise and begin reshaping our literary histories of war fiction has become especially apparent amid public discussion of the large-scale return of soldiers following the end of the war in Iraq and specific tragic events like the case of Staff Sergeant Robert Bales. For, once again, these conversations threaten to collapse into one-sided conceptions of war framed by national allegiance. Public discussions of war often focus on war trauma and PTSD, and while these have been crucial in generating a greater awareness about the psychologically painful experience of war, the current discourse of trauma problematically delimits who suffers from war and often entails a depoliticized rhetoric of personal and national healing. The privileging of the individual subject and the nation in trauma theory dovetails with trends in the genre of American war fiction itself; among other effects, this dovetailing has helped to naturalize the tendency, studied by Lynne Hanley and Maureen Ryan, for white American male soldiers to become the locus of literary attention.¹ The convergence of war fiction and trauma theory, then, often reinforces a stubbornly nationalistic, masculine canon of American war fiction. Most problematically, this convergence erases the essentially interactive nature of war

trauma; accordingly, it elides the experiences of nurses and noncombatants on all sides of the battle while also obscuring women's distinctive war experiences, even when the fiction itself sometimes includes these dimensions. I will argue that a transnational method can counter these imbalances in trauma theory and in studies of US war fiction, especially by tracking the fiction's transnational gestures, in every sense of the word "gesture."

Wai Chee Dimock has described the problematic assumption within literary studies that affects our understanding of war fiction as well: "Nationhood, on this view, is endlessly reproduced in all spheres of life. This reproductive logic assumes that there is a seamless correspondence between the temporal and spatial boundaries of the nation and the boundaries of all other expressive domains."² The consequence of this "seamless correspondence" for war literature is that a tightly framed view of the American soldier causes us to miss literature's robust capacity to register the transnational dimension of war. A transnational viewpoint can play an important role in uncovering how fictional representations of war are particularly entangled in considerations of national power, as wars are a kind of limit-case transnational environment in which boundaries of the nation are most imperiled yet most fiercely recapitulated. In intensely expressive forms, American literature bears the traces of the uneven global relationships to the power and pain involved in war.

In this essay I engage Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* from a transnational perspective.³ I chose this text because it is one of the most widely taught and highly influential works of American war fiction that reproduces and generates many of the nation-focused blind spots that I describe above. I begin with an examination of the figure of the soldier-author in O'Brien's text as understood within a version of trauma theory that stops short of traversing the boundaries of the nation. I then zoom out from the figure of the American soldier and focus instead on the few, though central, scenes of interaction between the American and Vietnamese characters. Critical scholarship on *The Things They Carried* has not adequately addressed these perplexing moments of the text; I argue that these scenes importantly reorient us within the text by revealing the text's own struggle with its national US frame. Discerning this gesture beyond the national frame requires us to develop new ways of reading the experience of war. Below I elaborate a methodology of reading characters' bodily gestures in these scenes of interaction in order to foreground the way that fiction offers a glimpse into war as a relational event, always involving two or more participants. In the case of *The Things They Carried*, this approach brings into view a heretofore unnoticed pattern of mimicry between the American characters and Vietnamese characters that reshapes our scholarly understanding of the text's representation of war trauma.

I. Tim O'Brien(s), the Survivor Author, and the American Nation

Published in 1990, *The Things They Carried* contains twenty-two stories or chapters that circulate around the experiences of the American men of the Alpha Company during and after the Vietnam War. Though both literary critics and the author Tim O'Brien resist definitively classifying the work as a novel or a collection of short stories,⁴ it is clear that the sections within *The Things They Carried* link to one another through a recurring cast of characters, the stories' referencing of one another, and, importantly for this essay, what most critics see as the organizing yet indeterminate center of the character named Tim O'Brien, a character who is also a writer. The text characterizes this figure through his repeated, and perhaps self-soothing, statement that "I'm forty-three years old, and a writer now, and the war has been over for a long while."⁵ This character named Tim O'Brien (hereafter "character Tim") is the first-person narrator and focalizing perspective for all but four of the stories in the text: three third-person stories "The Things They Carried," "Speaking of Courage," and "In the Field"; and one story at the literal center of the work "The Man I Killed,"⁶ in which a discernible narrative perspective completely gives way to pure focalization, a technique I explore in more detail below. Though the character and the author share a name, similar Vietnam War experiences, and the occupation of writer, numerous studies have traced the biographical differences between the character Tim and the actual author Tim O'Brien (hereafter "author O'Brien").⁷ Therefore, it is generally accepted that the character Tim, who speaks from the "I" perspective and self-reflexively describes writing the stories in the text, is not coextensive with the author O'Brien. However, in an interesting slippage, the critical work on *The Things They Carried* takes for granted that, when the character Tim describes his impetus for writing fiction about his war experiences, he also expresses the author O'Brien's motivations for writing fiction.⁸

This critical slippage deserves discussion in relation to trauma theory's conception of the survivor author and its rhetoric of healing, for the slippage reflects the often unquestioned privileging of soldier-authors in the genre of American war literature more generally. From the standpoint of trauma theory, the identity of a survivor author and authorial intention play a much more prominent role in the reception of trauma fiction than in other genres of contemporary fiction.⁹ In general, because the nature of traumatic experience as understood in trauma theory renders ideas of "truth" or "fact" problematic, survivors find fiction, with its more flexible, expressive links to the real, more appropriate than other traditional nonfiction forms of writing. Therefore, when survivors of certain traumatic experiences write fiction about similar experiences, there often remains a strong link between the fictional content and the author's past.¹⁰ War fiction has increasingly converged with this field of trauma fiction, as the last century of American war literature has marked the conversion of the soldier-character from the hero of the traditional war story to the psychological victim of war.¹¹ An examination of the genre of American war fiction

reveals that the “survivor” author in this field has largely been conflated with the “soldier” author. The often-used phrase, “You had to be there,” which communicates war’s unspeakable horror as well as its inaccessibility to those who were not “there,” has become a kind of touchstone for the genre of war fiction, leading to its privileging of authors with past military service.¹² This widespread belief that veterans of war possess the “right” kind of experience to authentically write war fiction emerges partly from the command that the idea of trauma has on the American imagination. Central to both trauma theory and the clinical treatment of PTSD is a belief, although to varying degrees, in the healing power of narrative. Putting the war experience into words can promote a recognition and sense of coming to terms both personally and collectively, and trauma narrative often entails this rhetoric of healing wherein the reparation of personal and/or national identity becomes an end. I want to emphasize here that the roles that literature can play in both the healing process and in bringing to light suppressed painful histories are extremely important. But I also want to insist that this is not *all* war literature offers us, that it’s important to ask ourselves where the lens of trauma crops our view of war literature’s generative potential.

I suggest that trauma theory’s conception of the survivor author works in tandem with the obvious shared name “Tim O’Brien” to condition the critical tendency both to see the character Tim as the organizing link across all the stories in the text (operating metafictionally as a writer of those stories in which he is not present) and to see a seamlessness between character Tim’s ideas on writing and those of author O’Brien. This blurred distinction through the occupation of survivor author generates the untroubled assumption that both Tim O’Briens share the same motivation for writing fiction: narrative’s healing power. In the final story of *The Things They Carried*, “The Lives of the Dead,” character Tim describes the restorative power of the process of writing, saying, “I realize it is as Tim trying to save Timmy’s life with a story.”¹³ Writing smoothes the rupture between character Tim and his prewar self, and this identity-restoring power of narrative, a tenet so central in trauma theory, becomes the impetus for the process of writing on the diegetic level of the text. This healing power of narrative becomes one of the central messages of *The Things They Carried*. In this line of thinking, the character Tim O’Brien becomes a screen for the survivor author O’Brien, a screen that we as readers are constantly trying to look around to see what really matters in the book: the dynamic survivor author.

I suggest that we shouldn’t overlook what I see as a productive tension between the two survivor writers, the character Tim and author O’Brien, by assuming their motivations for writing are the same. Not only does the desire to read for a univocal survivor author install the reparation of Western subjectivity itself as the central stake of the text, it also tends to introduce an uncritical dimension of irreproachable representational choices in war texts; because the fiction functions as a process of healing for the survivor author, one is loathe to criticize its investment in

distinctly American, male considerations. While my aim in reading *The Things They Carried* is not to fault O'Brien on the level of authorial intention or dismiss the importance of personal healing, what I do suggest is that looking for the way that this highly influential war text succeeds or fails in presenting the larger context beyond the soldier's perspective is integral to a transnational reappraisal of the genre of war literature itself.

One way *The Things They Carried* limits a view of this larger context beyond is its sparse representation of Vietnamese people, whether civilian or soldier. Apart from a few scenes, the Viet Nam of the text is simply peopled by the American men of the Alpha Company. When the enemy does appear, it's generally as a haunting, disembodied presence, as in the story "The Ghost Soldiers" when character Tim says of Viet Nam: "It was ghost country, and Charlie Cong was the main ghost."¹⁴ While character Tim's description refers to guerilla warfare, it also makes the Viet Cong invisible and already dead, rhetorically repeating centuries of erasure of nonwhite "Others." As Judith Butler points out in *Frames of War*, representational strategies that cast a certain population as somehow nonhuman are tied up in operations of power and, in this case of war fiction, very much tied up in American power; Butler writes, "the frames through which we apprehend or, indeed, fail to apprehend the lives of others as lost or injured (lose-able or injurable) are politically saturated. They are themselves operations of power."¹⁵ Character Tim's focalizing viewpoint, which directs much of what we see and know of the war, has a distinct framing of the Vietnamese that constantly redirects the reader away from the larger relational contexts of the Vietnam War back through an American-interested perspective. While this American perspective is one saturated with guilt and trauma, from a transnational perspective there is something terribly suspect about literarily effacing the people and terrain of Viet Nam in the service of an American lesson about guilt; disturbingly, this oversight of the specificity of Viet Nam reproduces an American political mindset that functioned as a rationale for the war itself.

We can plumb the ethical consequences of the American frame in *The Things They Carried* by turning to a troubling scene in the story "The Man I Killed," the work's first material representation of the Vietnamese enemy. This story, placed in the middle of the work and spanning seven pages, functions as a center of gravity in the text where the soldiers' actions that drive the other stories come to a standstill in a static, startling scene of death. More specifically, the layers of telescopic perspective through which we have been receiving stories in the work collapse onto a scene of direct visual intensity with no perceptible focalizing character: apart from the title and the identical phrase substituted for name of the Vietnamese enemy ("The Man I Killed"), the word "I" falls out of the story completely, a point not explored in any critical work on the book as of yet. What the story presents is a descriptively photographic image of a destroyed body, an imagined backstory for the dead man, and a one-sided pantomime of surrounding American characters' actions and monologue directed at a seemingly absent character Tim. As one of the only

representations of the enemy in *The Things They Carried*, this gruesome scene heightens the dehumanization and imaginative appropriation of the Vietnamese. “The Man I Killed” opens with this detailed description:

His jaw was in his throat, his upper lip and teeth were gone, his one eye was shut, his other eye was a star-shaped hole, his eyebrows were thin and arched like a woman’s, his nose was undamaged, there was a slight tear at the lobe of one ear, his clean black hair was swept upward into a cowlick at the rear of the skull, his forehead was lightly freckled, his fingernails were clean, the skin at his left cheek was peeled back in three ragged strips, his right cheek was smooth and hairless, there was a butterfly on his chin, his neck was open to the spinal cord, and the blood there was thick and shiny and it was this wound that had killed him.¹⁶

Crucially, *all* we are presented with in terms of narration here is pure focalization, positioning the scene as hypervisual and tightly framed in an exclusive, though absent, line of vision. This technique of presenting the body can certainly gesture toward traumatic shock, as Mark Heberle and others have suggested.¹⁷ However, the formal absence of the Tim character calls for an additional reading, as this narrative technique inevitably calls up the aesthetic situation of the photograph, invoking a relation that Susan Sontag states most clearly: “To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge—and, therefore, like power.”¹⁸ While this literary description is not a visual image, its coroner-like detail of bodily destruction mimics the form of a photograph, and Sontag’s work provides a way to discern the complicated power relations at play in this scene. Furthermore, the cataloguing of physical detail in this image follows Sontag’s assertion that photographs “make an inventory” (22) and parallels the opening story’s central metaphor, the detailed list of the tangible and intangible things that the soldiers carried. These carried items elaborate the soldier’s identities and, as a parallel to the opening story, the “Man I Killed” scene mercilessly objectifies the dead Vietnamese man’s body in order to elaborate the viewing soldier’s guilt. A further level of objectification comes through in Azar’s and Kiowa’s comments to the absent Tim character, whom they address as “Tim” but, again, who does not appear in the narrative. Azar lays out the brute fact of killing’s literal objectification when he congratulates, “Oh, man, you fuckin’ trashed the fucker.”¹⁹ In less explicit terms, Kiowa draws attention to the objectifying narrative gaze by his repeated urgings to “stop *staring*” (126, 128).

From this photographic image of destruction, “The Man I Killed” then links the objectification of the man’s body to the process of narrativization in its presentation of an imagined life story for the body: “He had been born, maybe, in

1946 in the village of My Khe near the central coastline. . . . He was not a fighter. . . . He liked books. . . . He imagined covering his head and lying in a deep hole and closing his eyes and not moving until the war was over. He had no stomach for violence” (125–26). Critics acknowledge that the backstory created here of a scholarly man with an aversion to war and fighting applies less definitively, if at all, to the dead man and more so to the character Tim (and in many ways, to author O’Brien).²⁰ This fantasized backstory casts the Vietnamese man as a projection of the character Tim’s identity while simultaneously revealing Tim’s anxiety about his own relationship to nation. Here, in a close-up of the most fundamental relation specific to war—the soldier facing his enemy—national power structures vision and narrative, positioning the relationality of war as a moment marked by a troubled boundary between empathic identification and an appropriative, violent gaze that figures the “Man I Killed” as radically unknowable apart from American terms. This presents a question: Is this scene an indication that author O’Brien is willing to trade on a Vietnamese person’s trauma in order to narrate American trauma, even in the service of exposing American guilt? I would argue not wholly, and in order to see this we need to preserve the distinction between character Tim and author O’Brien.

The formal choice that O’Brien makes in his removal of the character Tim in this scene can signal something further, allowing us to reread “The Man I Killed” as a direct dramatization of the ethical issues surrounding the viewpoint of the survivor author, a point to which I will return in my conclusion. In order to substantiate this claim that *The Things They Carried* establishes a critical perspective on the American survivor author apart from those perspectives expressed by the character Tim, I move now to close readings of scenes in which the characters push out of the American frame. Specifically, in the few scenes where American soldiers interact with Vietnamese civilians, we see that, through gestures, the text makes the limitation or inadequacy of the American narrative frame visible. In this way, *The Things They Carried* carries out Butler’s mandate “to call the frame into question” in order to show that “something exceeds the frame that troubles our sense of reality,”²¹ thereby destabilizing the normativity of national power as a structuring feature of war stories. When we read for these moments in the text, in which a Vietnamese person becomes apprehendable as a life, against the hypervisual dead body of the “Man I Killed,” we set the objectifying still image of the body into motion, breaking the frame of O’Brien’s work.

II. Gesture and the Transnational Frame of *The Things They Carried*

Attention to characters’ bodily gestures in *The Things They Carried* opens a previously unexamined dimension of the text that moves us toward an understanding of war trauma as a transnational concept rooted in the violent relatedness of Americans and the Vietnamese during the Vietnam War. Influenced by feminist, performance, and postcolonial theories, this methodology recognizes that characters’ bodies work

expressively as tools of signification, even when authors do not grant a character voice or focal perspective. In *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, Elizabeth Grosz describes the importance of scholarly attention to the body: “Far from being an inert, passive, noncultural and ahistorical term, the body may be seen as the crucial term, the site of contestation, in a series of economic, political, sexual, and intellectual struggles.”²² Especially in war fiction, in which the chaos of battle and its painful aftermath largely defy other forms of representation, characters’ actions become a mode through which an author tells his story. At times, these bodies mark characters’ trauma, but what they consistently express is those characters’ relationships to national power, a constant, albeit shadowy, presence in American war fiction. Characters enact what Kurt Vonnegut in his subtitle to *Slaughterhouse-Five* famously calls “a duty-dance with death,”²³ war’s painful brand of transnational choreography. In *The Things They Carried*, close readings of gesture specifically demonstrate that the interactions between the American characters and the Vietnamese characters are those in which the Americans mimic the gestures of the Vietnamese. This mimicry, which has distinct links to postcolonial theory, reveals not only an American anxiety about the war but also enacts the way that certain literary frames inscribe Vietnamese presence in American terms.

Parody, imitation, and mimicry are highly recognizable themes in *The Things They Carried* on fictional and metafictional levels. Most visibly, the American soldiers of the Alpha Company, young men unprepared for the action of war, keep fear at bay in the field by acting like the movie stars that they have seen in war films and westerns. The idea of parody also ties in author O’Brien’s use of metafiction in his incorporation of character Tim. In discussing these levels of parody, Wenping Gan writes, “O’Brien takes another form of parody, bantering the authority of an author and revealing the limitations of the author in creative writing.”²⁴ Here, I extend Gan’s thinking a step further and emphasize that, through its use of parody, we can read the work as “revealing the limitations” of the American author and, even more particularly, the American survivor author.

The significance of interactive gestures in *The Things They Carried* emerges in reference to the postcolonial work of Homi Bhabha, which traces the longer history of mimicry and its relationship to colonial power. Of the way that mimicry becomes a sign of a power relation, Bhabha writes, “colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite. . . . Mimicry is, thus the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power. Mimicry is also the sign of the inappropriate, however, a difference or recalcitrance which coheres the dominant strategic function of colonial power, intensifies surveillance, and poses an immanent threat to both ‘normalized’ knowledges and disciplinary powers.”²⁵ Bhabha’s work specifically addresses the colonized mimicking the colonizer’s discourse here but, as I will show, this ambivalence also applies to Americans mimicking the Vietnamese in O’Brien’s text.

The gestures flesh out a power relation that complicates a binary view of war through the vital role (and even presence) of civilians and the interdependency between American soldiers and the Vietnamese people, both allies and hostile.

In this way, a pattern emerges in which *The Things They Carried* uses characters' bodily gestures to stage scenes where the authority of the American military discourse comes into friction with those material realities that it cannot contain. Furthermore, this reading of gestural mimicry in Bhabha's terms works against the American grain and points beyond a Cold War framework by registering the much longer anticolonial struggle in Viet Nam that often falls out in contemporary understanding of the war. This important transnational shift recorded in gestures of mimicry emerges forcefully in the two short stories "Church" and "Style," which come before and after the two stories ("The Man I Killed" and "Ambush") that represent the dead body of the Vietnamese soldier. By contextualizing "Church" and "Style" as an alternative frame for "The Man I Killed" story, an even more nuanced, transnational view of O'Brien's critique of the survivor author emerges.

The work's eleventh section that is barely five pages long, "Church" describes the Alpha Company encountering a nearly abandoned pagoda along the Batangan Peninsula where they meet the two remaining Buddhist monks, one old and one young. As the character Tim describes, "They spoke almost no English at all. When we dug our foxholes in the yard, the monks did not seem upset or displeased, though the younger one performed a washing motion with his hands. No one could decide what it meant."²⁶ The presence of the Buddhist monks in this story parallels historical circumstances of the Vietnam War; Buddhist monks occupied a space of tension during the war as they were not tolerated by either the Communist government of the North or the Catholic government of the South. The mysterious "washing motion" that the Buddhist monks perform is suggestive of a *mudra*, hand gestures in Hindu and Buddhist practice that form an integral part of yoga and meditation. The meaning of these gestures, which help "eliminate negative thought forms and aid mood elevation,"²⁷ falls outside the scope of the text; the story never reveals what the "washing motion" means but includes the phrase "No one could decide what it meant" to register the movement's deeper meaning. While the character Tim describes the monks as they "giggled" and "smiled happily,"²⁸ the *mudra*-like motion suggests a breaking of their inner equilibrium and their ill feelings toward the American soldiers, signaling to us that there is something more complex going on in the monks' reactions that is not fully discernible within the focal frame of the story.

The monks supplement the "washing motion" of their hands with actions of literal washing; early in the story they bring buckets of water for the men to use to bathe (119), and then they engage in a tedious process of disassembling and cleaning Henry Dobbins's machine gun part by part (120–22). While the soldiers interpret the monks' acts as helpful service, in the context of Buddhism, the gestures convey ablution and ritual purification, necessary upon their entrance into the space of the

pagoda. This ritual takes on a heightened meaning through the monks' relationship to Henry Dobbins:

Though they were kind to all of us, the monks took a special liking for Henry Dobbins.

“Soldier Jesus,” they’d say, “good soldier Jesus.”

Squatting quietly in the cool pagoda, they would help Dobbins disassemble and clean his machine gun, carefully brushing the parts with oil. The three of them seemed to have an understanding. Nothing in words, just a quietness they shared. (120)

Most striking in this scene is that, when read through Buddhist practice, the monks' response to Henry Dobbins may not be based on “a special liking” for him; rather, as the machine gunner of the Alpha Company, Dobbins would have generated the most negative karma through killing and would thus be in most need of purification. In the only words the monks speak in this story, “good soldier Jesus,” they repeatedly appeal to Henry Dobbins through what they assume to be his Christian background by invoking the words of 2 Timothy 2:3: “Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus.”²⁹ While Paul's words here have been misconstrued throughout history to serve military needs, these Biblical lines call for one to suffer the world's consequences for adhering to the model of Christ's life of nonviolence. This shared emphasis on the practice of nonviolence becomes an “understanding” between the men as they work together to purify the machine gun. Importantly, as this understanding is based on “nothing in words,” the story positions this moment of mutual recognition between the Vietnamese monks and Henry Dobbins as outside the American frame of Tim's perspective. The irony, of course, is that while the soldiers are in the pagoda with the monks they are unaware of the fact that they are taking part in religious rites, though they realize that “it was mostly a very peaceful time.”³⁰ The character Kiowa, an American Indian and devout Baptist, is the only character who recognizes the space as “still a church” (122) and has objected from the beginning to their setting up camp in the pagoda.

The story “Church” ends with Henry Dobbins breaking the peace established between the monks and the American men when he resumes his soldierly status and orders them to leave the pagoda:

When the two monks finished cleaning the machine gun, Henry Dobbins began reassembling it, wiping off the excess oil, then he handed each of them a can of peaches and a chocolate bar. “Okay,” he said, “*didi mau*, boys. Beat it.” The monks bowed and moved out of the pagoda into the bright morning sunlight.

Henry Dobbins made the washing motion with his hands.

“You’re right,” he said. “All you can do is be nice. Treat them decent, you know?” (122–23)

The gestures in this scene choreograph an interaction between the soldier and the monks constructed around a central ambivalence and indeterminacy that further complicates a simple reading of these Vietnamese characters. First, Dobbins’s gesture of taking the machine gun from the monks’ hands and replacing it with the rations of chocolate and canned peaches has layered meaning. In the act of reclaiming and reassembling the gun, Dobbins signals his intention to return to fighting, counteracting the purification rites. Furthermore, there is kind of circuitous irony in Dobbins’s act of handing them the rations of chocolate and peaches, both of which have histories of colonial expropriation. The canned peach has a particular significance in the context of Vietnam, as peaches and the peach flower are traditionally associated with the celebration of the eighteenth-century victory of the Vietnamese against the Qing Dynasty invaders from China.³¹ The act, then, of presenting the Buddhist monk with a canned, mass-produced version of a native fruit steeped in Vietnamese cultural meaning shifts the gesture from an objectionable bribe to an enactment of an unequal power relation. The first story in the text, “The Things They Carried,” describes the soldiers’ possessions, like the canned peaches, in terms of their relationship to the United States and to the war: “it was the great American war chest—the fruits of science, the smokestacks, the canneries, the arsenals at Hartford . . . and for all the ambiguities of Vietnam, all the mysteries and unknowns, there was at least the single abiding certainty that they would never be at a loss for things to carry.”³² Henry Dobbins’s gesture of giving the monks these rations may have its roots in a good intention; however, it is simultaneously an act weighted by the American soldier’s ignorance of Vietnamese culture and a sad marker of a power relation specific to the material conditions of the American war in Viet Nam. This power relation plays out in Dobbins ordering the monks to leave their pagoda, using Vietnamese slang “*didi mau*,” which means approximately “go quickly.”

Finally, what is most significant here is the story closing with Henry Dobbins repeating the “washing motion with his hands,” which, whether intentionally mimicked or not, registers a genuine anxiety about his role in relation to the monks and to the war. The phrase that follows the gesture, ““You’re right,’ he said. ‘All you can do is be nice. Treat them decent, you know?’” is indeterminate as the dialogue tag “he” is unclear: Is this Dobbins or Kiowa speaking? In the context of the passage, it makes more sense for the speaker to be Dobbins, but the inclusion of “you’re right” throws off this possibility, as Kiowa has not previously said that they should treat anyone decently; those were Dobbins’s words (121). If it is Dobbins or Kiowa speaking here about their conduct as American soldiers, the words ring hollow, as

they have not been decent to the monks they just forced off of their land. Another option is that Dobbins is speaking belatedly to the monks through his use of their gesture; the “you’re” here could be plural, and Dobbins could be putting into words the previous moment of shared understanding and agreeing with the monks’ treatment of the American soldiers and their peaceful departure. If we read the gesture and phrase this way, Dobbins is forming a coalition with the monks, distancing himself from the American soldiers by referring to the soldiers as “them” instead of “us.” However, it’s important that Dobbins repeats the gesture after the monks have left; the gesture misses its moment to become a shared movement or point of communication.

Despite the failure of the gesture to either relieve Henry Dobbins’s guilt or become a mode of communication with the monks, the interaction staged in the story makes perceptible a possibility for a transnational relation of resistance to war. By this, I’m not suggesting that this story forwards a religious transcendence of war, but it does mark a moment in which the characters, through the generativity of gestures, slip the noose of normative American military authority. Any way that one interprets the phrase about being decent, Dobbins’s gesture still resolutely signals that he has literally been moved through the interaction with the Vietnamese monks. This idea of resistance extends to composition of the narrative itself; just as the focalizing narrator of the story doesn’t yield the meaning of the monks’ gesture (“no one could decide what it meant”), the text embeds Dobbins’s use of the gesture in a mire of narrative indeterminacy, signaling that there is “something beyond” the frame of the story. Even the title of the story calls attention to this: “Church” dramatizes this urge to reframe the sacred space of the Buddhist pagoda in Western terms.

Shortly after this story comes the story “Style,” which depicts the soldiers’ reactions to and the crude and malicious mimicking of a young Vietnamese woman. They watch her dance in the smoke of her recently burned-down village, which the Alpha Company may have burned: “There was no music. Most of the hamlet had burned down, including her house, which was now smoke, and the girl danced with her eyes half closed, her feet bare. She was maybe fourteen. She had black hair and brown skin. ‘Why’s she dancing?’ Azar said” (135). The story opens with a negative structure that expresses the expectations of character Tim. Also important in this negative phrasing is that we are introduced to the dancing woman through the phrase “her house,” before we even know that she will be the subject of the story. “Her house,” of course, is now nothing but smoke. In effect, the story begins with a kind of dismantling—both the music and perhaps the house that could have been used to try to understand this young woman are absent. Thus, the soldiers and the story approach the woman from a position of lack, and the lone figure of the dancing girl emerges against this background of destruction. The gaze of the focalizing perspective begins to categorize her features, as “maybe fourteen” and having “black hair and brown skin.” Against this objectifying and Othering gaze, Azar’s

question shifts the story back to the movement of her dance.³³ Immediately after his question appears the line “We searched through the wreckage but there wasn’t much to find” (135). However, we learn later that her family had all perished inside the burned house, which may have prompted her dance (135). The phrase “there wasn’t much to find,” then, continues the pattern of negative phrasing and belies this horrific discovery of corpses in the burned homes.

Rather than acknowledge what they *did* find in the rubble, the story goes on to describe the young woman’s gestures in more detail: “The girl danced mostly on her toes. She took tiny steps in the dirt in front of her house, sometimes making a slow twirl, sometimes smiling to herself. ‘Why’s she dancing?’ Azar said, and Henry Dobbins said it didn’t matter why, she just was” (135). The focalizing perspective cannot ascribe meaning to her dance, which Azar’s curious or frustrated repetition of “Why’s she dancing?” mirrors. Henry Dobbins’s response seems more resigned to the inaccessibility of her gestures from their American perspective, saying “it didn’t matter why, she just was.” Dobbins again here is open to forms of expression outside of the American standpoint, as his assertion that “she just was” affirms the young woman’s presence without seeking to classify her in Western terms or otherwise understand her.

Azar’s frustration with the dancing continues when the men discover the badly burned corpses of her family in the house: “When we dragged them out, the girl kept dancing. She put the palms of her hands against her ears, which must’ve meant something, and she danced sideways for a short while, and then backwards. She did a graceful movement with her hips. ‘Well, I don’t get it,’ Azar said. . . . A while later, when we moved out of the hamlet, she was still dancing. ‘Probably some kind of weird ritual,’ Azar said, but Henry Dobbins looked back and said no, the girl just liked to dance” (135–36). In addition to the continued description of her movements, the focalizing narrator here connects the phrase “which must’ve meant something” to the phrase used in the earlier scene at the pagoda when the character Tim cannot interpret the monks’ gestures but perceives their significance (“no one could decide what it meant”), likewise signaling a meaning beyond the American frame of the text. Azar’s responses in this passage demonstrate the way that he deals with the mounting frustration of not being able to answer “Why’s she dancing?” by coming to the conclusion that he cannot understand the dance (“Well, I don’t get it”) and then dismissing its importance (“Probably some kind of weird ritual”). Again, the disagreement over the significance of the dance takes place between Azar and Henry Dobbins, though Dobbins’s speaking for the young woman here is problematic in its own way as it ignores the dance’s setting beside the burned corpses of the girl’s family. Dobbins’s assertion that “the girl just liked to dance” is very possibly as much of a misreading as Azar’s, and, in effect, both Azar and Henry Dobbins dismiss the context of the girl’s gestures, a context that they in one way or another had a hand in creating.

The absurdity of this dismissal creates a tension that lingers within the Alpha Company even after they leave the scene of the dancing woman behind them, a tension that breaks into mimicry and then results in a continued hostility between Azar and Dobbins:

That night, after we'd marched away from the smoking village, Azar mocked the girl's dancing. He did funny jumps and spins. He put the palms of his hands against his ears and danced sideways for a while, and then backwards, and then did an erotic thing with his hips. But Henry Dobbins, who moved gracefully for such a big man, took Azar from behind and lifted him up high and carried him over to a deep well and asked if he wanted to be dumped in.

Azar said no.

"All right, then," Henry Dobbins said, "dance right."

(136)

What is most important in this scene is Azar's mimicry of the girl's dance and, unlike the pagoda scene, this mimicry is clearly a hostile form of mockery that reveals Azar's uneasiness about the war. Not only does he (and the narrative) repeat the movements of her dance in a "funny" way, but he also sexualizes the young woman (who was "maybe fourteen") by substituting her original dance movement with "an erotic thing with his hips." Through Azar's reinterpretation of the woman's dance in front of the other men, he asserts a universalizing logic of sexual politics that attempts to reassert the homosocial purity of the American military company. The rendering of the gestures of this scene (Dobbins "took Azar from behind . . ."), however, injects an important sexual ambiguity that destabilizes Azar's attempts to shore up American masculinity. The homoeroticism in the gestures' phrasing then shifts to violence, and Dobbins's order to "dance right" instates the imperative in the military of difference being subsumed under American heteronormativity.

The narrative skirts the destructive violence of the Alpha soldiers and the results of this violence by training its eye on the figure of the young woman. "Style" dramatizes, through the woman's gestures and their effects on Azar and Dobbins, the way in which the body of the Vietnamese woman becomes the locus of anxiety for the American soldiers. The mimicry here illustrates the tension that Chandra Talpade Mohanty describes within a Western discursive construct of the "third-world woman" as a human caught in the dissonant ideas of "'Woman'—a cultural and ideological composite Other constructed through diverse representational discourses . . . —and 'woman'—real, material subjects of their collective histories."³⁴ The friction of these two identities accounts for Azar's inability to fully inscribe the Vietnamese woman in American terms. We need to remember that this woman has somehow survived the destruction that befalls her entire village, and her dance

positions her as not passive. Her dance, which she performs “with her eyes half closed,” resists the presence of the soldiers: she is not performing for them, and she continues to dance against the atrocity even as they march out of the smoking village, unnerving the American men’s feelings of supremacy. The detailed descriptions of the dance effectively unsettle the structure of the story itself, as the narrative of the men’s process of destruction is constantly interrupted by the action of her dance.

Both “Church” and “Style” present bodily gestures that express Vietnamese civilians’ grief that the American soldiers see but cannot fully comprehend, grief that is a response to circumstances that the soldiers have in some way created or provoked (the destruction of the land around the pagoda and the burning of the village). Whether sparked by guilt or some other form of anxiety, the soldiers turn from the sight of the Vietnamese and mimic their gestures, reenacting in American terms the expressions they do not understand. Although the focalizing character Tim and the other soldiers cannot make sense of the Vietnamese civilians’ gestures, the civilians’ movements resolutely mark their place in the text as indications of that to which we do not have access through the American frame of the text itself. Thus, these gestures and their mimicry mark the double articulation of the national frame, both in its success, as it delimits the sphere of appearance, and also in its failure, as it cannot contain that which unsettles and subverts the American perspective on which it depends. Overall, the interaction of these gestures recovers a limited sense of the transnational, relational dimension of the war in *The Things They Carried*.

A consideration of these two stories as an alternative frame within the American frame of the work as a whole informs a new reading of that other tightly framed, hypervisual story, “The Man I Killed.” Embedded in this new context, we see that this story follows the same pattern as “Church” and “Style”: that is, the American turns in anxiety from the sight of the expression of pain or death he has inflicted on a Vietnamese person and resorts to a form of conflicted self-expression. In the case of “The Man I Killed,” the form of self-expression is the narrative of the imagined backstory for the dead man. In this way, *The Things They Carried* stages at its very center the situation of the survivor author as he turns from the anxiety provoked by the relational grounds of violence in war to the one-sided refuge of fiction. This reading allows us space to envision the author O’Brien dramatizing through the character Tim the ethical danger that confronts the survivor author in this turn from war experience to narrative. Despite the character Tim’s final assertions that stories save lives, the ironic distance between author and character-writer in “The Man I Killed” story reminds us that certain stories also simultaneously destroy other lives.

Finally, rereading “The Man I Killed” from a transnational perspective also reminds us about our position as readers. The removal of the character Tim from the story’s focalizing frame positions the reader as the direct onlooker—many of us are that American looking on at the lifeless body; in this way, Kiowa’s repeated urgings

to “stop staring”³⁵ carry a new meaning, becoming a performative moment in the text that invokes the ethical dimension of reading. Kiowa, who in a work without heroes comes the closest to representing the voice of moral reason, speaks out to us from the fictional page, making us aware, perhaps, of a readerly anxiety that projects itself onto the figure of the authentic survivor author and, more generally, onto the figure of the Vietnam veteran.

By reinstating the writerly tension between the author Tim O’Brien and his character, we see that O’Brien’s purpose in writing and the purpose stated by his character do not have to be coextensive, and the scenes above critique the limited narrative scope that American survivor writing often instates. The pattern of mimicry inserts a provocative concurrent meaning for the central gesture of “carrying” in this work; rather than only seeing the soldiers’ acts of carrying as the burden of trauma, “carrying” also holds the meaning of appropriation, both through American culture and through the process of American war writing. When non-Western characters are cast as ghosts and thereby rendered invisible or unreal, we face the ethical demand of finding the material, interactive, and plot-determining presence of the Other in *The Things They Carried*, of reading against the grain of a text that is so exclusively focused on American soldiers and the survivor author.

While the survivor author’s representation of the traumatic subjectivity of those who have participated in war represents an important move away from the monolithic hero of traditional war stories, this emphasis on the traumatized soldier stops short of fully interrogating the kinds of Western frames through which we understand experiences of war and thus limits the intelligibility of non-Western characters. There are real stakes in this limitation; in 2011, political scientist John Tirman concluded that “the system of knowledge in war time disallows, in effect, a serious and sustained effort—a politically consequential effort—to regard the human costs . . . because it challenges fundamentally Americans’ self-regard, our mission, our place as the city on the hill.”³⁶ That literary studies of war reproduce this one-dimensional “system of knowledge” compels us to reconsider the ethics of exclusion in a narrow view of whose lives matter in war fiction. Viewing more three-dimensionally an expanded transnational terrain of war from both the survivor’s point-blank perspective and from the nonsurvivor’s imaginative distance fleshes out what it means to “be there” in the complex situation of war.

Notes

¹ See Lynne Hanley, *Writing War: Fiction, Gender, and Memory* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1991); and Maureen Ryan, *The Other Side of Grief: The Home Front and the Aftermath in American Narratives of the Vietnam War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008).

² Wai Chee Dimock, *Through Other Continents: American Literature across Deep Time* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 3.

³ Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (New York: Broadway, 1990).

⁴ For example, Steven Kaplan writes, "In a recent interview I asked Tim O'Brien what he felt was the most adequate designation [novel or collection of stories]. He said that *The Things They Carried* is neither a collection of stories nor a novel: he preferred to call it a work of fiction." Steven Kaplan, "The Undying Uncertainty of the Narrator in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 35, no. 1 (1993): 52n1.

⁵ O'Brien, *Things They Carried*, 32.

⁶ "The Man I Killed" runs from pages 124–30 in a work that is 246 pages.

⁷ See, for example, Susan Farrell, "Tim O'Brien and Gender: A Defense of *The Things They Carried*," *CEA Critic: An Official Journal of the College English Association* 66, no. 1 (2003): 1–21; Benjamin Goluboff, "Tim O'Brien's Quang Ngai," *ANQ: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes, and Reviews* 17, no. 2 (2004): 53–58; Kaplan, "Undying Uncertainty of the Narrator," 43–52; and Lynn Wharton, "Tim O'Brien and American National Identity: A Vietnam Veteran's Imagined Self in *The Things They Carried*," *49th Parallel: An Interdisciplinary Journal of North American Studies* 5 (2000), <http://www.49thparallel.bham.ac.uk/back/issue5/wharton.htm>.

⁸ For example, see references in note 7, and to provide an illustration, Susan Farrell writes of the healing power of narrative as one of the central messages of *The Things They Carried*: "While much Vietnam War literature expresses the 'incommunicability' of war trauma . . . O'Brien's work expresses the exact opposite: that through imaginative acts of storytelling and reading, the atrocity of war can begin to be understood and thus can begin to heal" (Farrell, "Tim O'Brien and Gender," 20).

⁹ For example, foundational texts of trauma theory that are grounded in psychoanalytic approaches, such as Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996) and Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1991), emphasize narrative's power in allowing survivors of traumatic experiences both to personally navigate the knowing and not knowing associated with

trauma and to bear witness to others. Furthermore, Caruth locates the strength of traumatic narrative in the performativity of its language; by enacting the very incomprehensibility of traumatic experience, “the text no longer simply knows what it says, but indeed does more than it knows” (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 89–90). Thus, the process of writing itself becomes a site of personal and collective witnessing and healing centered on the survivor’s traumatic experience.

¹⁰ In relation to O’Brien’s fiction, Mark A. Heberle most fully expresses this viewpoint that trauma is the central shaping force of all of Tim O’Brien’s writings in his book *A Trauma Artist: Tim O’Brien and the Fiction of Vietnam* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2001). In relation to the literature of the Vietnam War, see Kalí Tal’s *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). And, more broadly, on trauma fiction’s role as “counterhistory,” see Nancy J. Peterson’s *Against Amnesia: Contemporary Women Writers and the Crises of Historical Memory* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001). As Kalí Tal emphatically writes of trauma literature, “bearing witness is an aggressive act. . . . If survivors can retain control over the interpretation of their trauma, they can sometimes force a shift in the social and political structure” (Tal, *Worlds of Hurt*, 7).

¹¹ Henry Fleming from Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage* (New York: D. Appleton, 1895) is a remarkable early instance of a soldier-character being depicted as the psychological victim of war, and many American war literature scholars identify *The Red Badge of Courage* as the first modern American war novel for this reason. See, for example, see Peter G. Jones, *War and the Novelist: Appraising the American War Novel* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1976); and Ryan, *The Other Side of Grief*.

¹² A brief survey of major writers in the genre of American war fiction includes authors with military service such as John Dos Passos, Ernest Hemingway, Joseph Heller, Kurt Vonnegut, Norman Mailer, Michael Herr, Tim O’Brien, Larry Heinemann, Robert Olen Butler, and, most recently, Karl Marlantes.

¹³ O’Brien, *Things They Carried*, 246.

¹⁴ O’Brien, *Things They Carried*, 202.

¹⁵ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (New York: Verso, 2009), 1.

¹⁶ O’Brien, *Things They Carried*, 124.

¹⁷ Heberle, *Trauma Artist*, 201. Stefano Rosso also notes “Tim’s shock” as a primary feature of the story, in *Red Badges of Courage: Wars and Conflicts in American Culture*, ed. Biancamaria Pisapia, Ugo Rubeo, and Anna Scacchi (Rome: Bulzoni, 1998), 196.

¹⁸ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), 4.

¹⁹ O’Brien, *Things They Carried*, 123.

²⁰ For example, Mark Herberle in *A Trauma Artist* writes, “O’Brien’s narrator tries to resolve his feelings both by re-creating the young Vietnamese soldier in his own image, especially his sense of obligation to others, and by imagining that his victim’s death will find some redemption” (Heberle, *Trauma Artist*, 202).

²¹ Butler, *Frames of War*, 9.

²² Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 19.

²³ Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five, or The Children’s Crusade: A Duty Dance with Death* (New York: Dell, 1969).

²⁴ Wenping Gan, *On Robert Stone and Tim O’Brien: American Fiction of the Vietnam War within and Beyond* (Xiamen, China: Xiamen University Press, 2004), 190.

²⁵ Homi Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” in *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 86.

²⁶ O’Brien, *Things They Carried*, 119.

²⁷ Rajendar Menen, *The Healing Power of Mudras: The Yoga of the Hands* (Philadelphia: Singing Dragon, 2010), 23.

²⁸ O’Brien, *Things They Carried*, 119.

²⁹ 2 Timothy 2:3 (New International Version).

³⁰ O’Brien, *Things They Carried*, 119.

³¹ Jules Janick, “Temperate Fruit,” in *Encyclopedia of Food and Culture*, ed. Solomon Katz (New York: Scribner, 2003), 68. Originally grown in China and in others areas of Asia, such as regions of Vietnam, the peach traveled through the Mediterranean to Greece and Rome and then later became widely available in Europe and America.

³² O’Brien, *Things They Carried*, 16.

³³ This gaze positions the girl as racially Other through her difference from the presumably white soldiers; as Jen Dunnaway argues, O’Brien’s decision to largely omit considerations of race from *The Things They Carried* leads to the assumption of the characters’ unity through whiteness and “reinforces (rather than challenges) the centrality of a white imperialist perspective.” Jen Dunnaway, “‘One More Redskin Bites the Dirt’: Racial Melancholy in Vietnam War Representation,” *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 64, no. 1 (2008): 123.

³⁴ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” in *The Routledge Critical and Cultural Theory Reader*, ed. Neil Badmington and Julia Thomas (New York: Routledge, 2008), 382–83.

³⁵ O'Brien, *Things They Carried*, 126, 128.

³⁶ John Tirman, *The Deaths of Others: The Fate of Civilians in America's Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 366.

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