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From Tim O'Brien and Gender: A Defense of The Things They Carried¹

Alongside the popularity and critical acclaim awarded the outpouring of recent U.S. accounts of the Vietnam War sit some more quietly voiced criticisms of this body of literature. Perhaps the most compelling of these critiques has emerged from recent feminist scholars who argue that much Vietnam War literature replicates traditional western notions of gender and thus reinforces patriarchal institutions and beliefs. Two key works published in 1989 set the stage for much of the feminist criticism of Vietnam War literature that was to follow. Susan Jeffords' The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War (1989) explores popular film and narrative representations of the war. Jeffords argues for reading the war as a "construction of gendered interests," despite the fact that war might initially seem to be the domain of men and not relevant to gender analysis (81). A special issue of the journal Vietnam Generation devoted to the topic of gender and the war also appeared in 1989. In her introduction to this special issue, editor Jacqueline Lawson responds to a much-read Esquire article by ex-Marine William Broyles, Jr., "Why Men Love War." While Broyles claims that "war is the enduring condition of man, period," Lawson writes that she hopes this issue of the journal will dispel such a "canard—that war is the exclusive province of men, a closed and gendered activity inscribed by myth, informed by ritual, and enacted solely through the power relations of patriarchy" (6). To this end, she has explored some of the brutal rape and torture scenes of Vietnamese women that occur regularly in the literature.

[... ] Critic Lorrie Smith has added to the debate, pointing out that "most popular treatments of the war—for all their claims to 'tell it like it was'—reveal more about the cultural and political climate of the 1980s than about the war itself" (Back 115). Smith connects a 1980s backlash against the feminist movement to the misogyny she reads in Vietnam War literature, a misogyny which she describes as "very visible," as seemingly "natural and expected." In popular representations, Smith argues, the "Vietnam War is being reconstructed as a site where white American manhood—figuratively as well as literally wounded during the war and assaulted by the women's movement for twenty years—can reassert its dominance in the social hierarchy" (Back 115).

The work of Tim O'Brien, while highly praised, has not been exempt from the criticism of feminist scholars. Lorrie Smith argues that the short fiction that eventually came together to make up The Things They Carried silences women and re-enforces traditional masculine views of war and gender. Smith writes that O'Brien's "text offers no challenge to a discourse of war in which apparently innocent American men are tragically wounded and women are objectified, excluded, and silenced" ("Things" 17). While Smith points out that her intent "is not to devalue O'Brien's technical skill or emotional depth," she does object to "account for [her] own discomfort as a female reader and to position The Things They Carried within a larger cultural project to rewrite the Vietnam War from a masculinist and strictly American perspective" (17). She argues that, even though O'Brien's narrator says that only those who were there can fully understand the events which occurred, he still permits a bond to form between male readers and the characters on the basis that women are completely unable to understand "the things men do." Male readers become less marked as outsiders than women as the stories progress since "the shared language of patriarchy" eases the general incommunicability of the war trauma for men (19).

Smith supports her argument with a close reading of both the longer stories that first appeared in Esquire magazine and the shorter vignettes that O'Brien added when he collected the material as a book. She argues that the opening,
title story of the collection "establishes a pattern ... for the rest of the book" in that it teaches readers that survival in war depends on "suppressing femininity" (24). Readers learn, as does Lieutenant Jimmy Cross, that the renunciation of the feminine, is "a sad but necessary cost of war" (24). Martha in the opening story, along with [the book's other female characters,] all represent another world: those back home who will never understand the war. Even more, this inability to understand is at least partly willful: they do not understand because they do not listen. [. . .]

While I find Smith's article thoughtful and intriguing, and while I agree with much feminist criticism of Vietnam War literature, this essay proposes that the work of Tim O'Brien, particularly *The Things They Carried*, stands apart from the genre as a whole. O'Brien is much more self-consciously aware of gender issues and critical of traditional gender dichotomies than are the bulk of U.S. writers about the Vietnam War. Though it is often tempting to forget it, readers must always bear in mind the distinction between O'Brien-the-narrator and O'Brien-the-author. This difference is crucial to understanding the book's central question: What is truth and how can truth best be communicated? How can we truly understand the experiences of another human being? I would suggest that O'Brien posits two very different responses to these questions and that his responses are directly related to some of the concerns about gender raised by feminist critics. The male characters in the book do indeed subscribe to patriarchal and condescending attitudes about gender; they believe that knowledge is attained experientially and thus they exclude women from understanding the war experience. Yet, always running counter to this view is its corrective: that trauma is communicable, that understanding may be attained through the imaginative acts of storytelling and reading, and that the male characters do not necessarily understand war and gender as well as they think they do.

1. "The Things They Carried" [. . .]

The book's opening story, "The Things They Carried," offers two competing narratives: the ultra-realistic, precise details of what the men carry (down to brand names and weights of objects listed in ounces) versus the more personal, more traumatic story of the death of Ted Lavender. Such a form underscores one of the novel's main concerns, the relation between fact and fiction [. . .] The concrete specificity of the lists in the opening story [. . .] set[s] readers up to expect a hard-nosed, factual account of the war. Thus, we might mistakenly read Jimmy Cross's story as fact as well—an omniscient, third-person account of the reality of war experience. Such a reading would be a mistake, though. We must remember that the story of Ted Lavender's death is filtered through the subjective experience of Lieutenant Jimmy Cross. It is a narrative that increasingly interrupts and subsumes the more objective story of the items the men carry with them in the field. Yet, it is not a story about men at war having to renounce the feminine. Rather, it is about the inevitable guilt associated with war deaths and what soldiers do with that guilt.

While Jimmy Cross certainly views Martha as inhabiting another world, separate from the war, and thus as representing home, purity, an innocence he no longer retains, I'd argue that readers are not supposed to make the same easy gender classifications that Cross does. This point is driven home by Cross's reaction to Lavender's death. Cross is not only a romantic who fantasizes a love affair that's not really there with Martha, he greatly exaggerates his responsibility for Lavender's death. The very randomness of Lavender's death—he is "zapped while zipping," shot after separating from the men briefly to urinate—belies Jimmy Cross's responsibility for the death. Cross blames himself for the death because, as the narrator tells us in a later story, "In the Field," "When a man died, there had to be blame" (177). The soldiers wish to find a reason for the deaths they witness in order to make them less frightening, less random and meaningless. Blame can provide the illusion that war deaths such as those of Lavender and Kiowa are preventable, if only someone behaves differently, more responsibly, in the future. So, Cross determines that his love for Martha, his fantasies about her, are the cause of Lavender's death and that, to prevent such deaths in the future, he will strictly follow standard operating procedures and "dispense with love," focusing instead on duty. Ironically, Lavender dies after the platoon has just finished searching Viet Cong tunnels, a tactic that was standard operating procedure, but an extremely dangerous undertaking. While Lee Strunk emerges intact from such a risky assignment, Ted Lavender dies a few moments later completely unexpectedly, while conducting the ordinary business of living.

Again, readers are supposed to see the irrationality of both Cross's burden of guilt as well as his resolve to be a better officer. In fact, it is his very refusal to question orders, to deviate from standard operating procedure, that leads him to camp in the "shithole" later in the book and inadvertently brings about the death of Kiowa, another accident, and one which many different characters claim blame for. Readers, then, are not supposed to see Cross's burning of Martha's picture and renunciation of the imagination as "sad but necessary" consequences of war, but rather as the attempts of a romantic and guilt-ridden young man to gain control over a situation in which he actually has very little power (Smith, "Things" 24). Because the burning of Martha's picture is linked to the burning of the Vietnamese village, readers see even more fully how mistaken and irrational Cross is in his reaction to Lavender's death.

V. "The Lives of the Dead"

"The Lives of the Dead" is as much a love story as it is a war story. The book, in fact, could be said to be framed by two love stories—the opening story which tells of Jimmy Cross's love for Martha and the final story which tells of the narrator's love as a nine-year-old for Linda, the little girl who dies of a brain tumor. [. . .] In "The Lives of the Dead," O'Brien deliberately juxtaposes traumatic war deaths with the traumatic death of Linda in order to undermine the old cliché of Vietnam War fiction: "if you weren't there, you can't possibly understand." "The Lives of the Dead" argues for the power of fiction, of imaginative creation. In stories, the dead can come to life; experiences can be communicated imaginatively.

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*CH. 9 | CRITICAL CONTEXTS*  

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The powerful status of fiction is perhaps nowhere so well illustrated as in the plot of the movie that nine-year-old Timmy attends on his date with Linda: The Man Who Never Was. In the film, the Allies plant false documents on the body of a dead British soldier to mislead the Germans about the site of the upcoming landings in Europe. "The Germans find the documents," O'Brien writes, and "the deception wins the war" (232). The dead soldier's fictional identity is more influential than his actual, biographical identity, which we never discover. In many ways, narrator O'Brien in the book is "the man who never was." He is a created persona whose stories teach us about the difficulty of getting to the truth of individual identity. The narrator looks at a photograph of himself from 1956, realizing that, "in the important ways" he has not changed at all: "the essence remains the same... the human life is all one thing, like a blade tracing loops on ice" (236). What shapes a person, then, is difficult to unravel. An individual seems to be the product of biological predisposition as well as a jumble of experiences: wartime experience as well as larger life experience. In any case, human essence and selfhood remain mysterious.

Because O'Brien works so diligently to connect war experience to human experience in general, I do not read his work as excluding or silencing women. One of O'Brien's most moving pieces is a personal essay he published in the New York Times Magazine in 1994, called "The Vietnam in Me." In this essay, O'Brien tells two stories simultaneously—the tale of his return to Vietnam over twenty years after having been a soldier there and the story of the disintegration of a serious love relationship. Nearly suicidal over the break-up, O'Brien has difficulty sleeping and writes that he is on "war time, which is the time we're all on at one point or another: when fathers die, when husbands ask for divorce, when women love are fast asleep beside men you wish were you" (55). Just as in "The Lives of the Dead" O'Brien links the physical corpse of the old Vietnamese man to those of Ted Lavender, Curt Lemon, and Kiowa, and finally to Linda's, O'Brien links wartime experience and life experience in this article. "If there's a lesson in this," he writes, "which there is not, it's very simple. You don't have to be in Nam to be in Nam" (55). While much Vietnamese literature expresses the "incommunicability" of war trauma, which is eased for men because of a shared patriarchal language, 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.

WORKS CITED


SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITING

1. Though The Things They Carried may be more obviously a "war story" than any other in this anthology, several others also deal with war or its aftereffects on combatants or civilians. These include Sherman Alexie's Flight Patterns, William Faulkner's Barn Burning, Amy Tan's Pair of Tickets, A. S. Byatt's The Thing in the Forest, and Ambrose Bierce's An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge. Write an essay comparing the treatment of war in at least two of these stories. What is similar and what's unique about what each story shows us or asks about war and its effects?

2. The Things They Carried is written in third person, oscillating between sections that (like the title) refer to the entire platoon, as if seen from a distance, and sections that instead home in on a single focal character or consciousness. Usually, that consciousness is Jimmy Cross's. But not always. Write an essay exploring how point of view and/or other aspects of narration shape the story's effects and meaning. Why and how might it matter, for example, that in one section we "overhear" a conversation—between Bowker and Kiowa—that Jimmy isn't privy to, and even spend one paragraph inside Kiowa's thoughts?

3. Like almost every literary critic who writes about The Things They Carried, those whose work appears in this chapter all seem to agree that the stories in it are metafictional—that is, they in various ways draw attention to the fact that they are stories and thus also become about stories and about the relationship between fiction and reality, stories and truth. The Things They Carried, however, may well be the least metafictional story in the book. Write a response paper or essay in which you analyze what, if anything, seems metafictional in and about the story and why and how exactly that might matter. Do the story's metafictional aspects make it seem less or more "true" or emotionally engaging, and in what ways?

4. Obviously, one topic of debate among scholars who write about The Things They Carried is the extent to which it does and/or doesn't reproduce traditional notions of masculinity and femininity. Drawing upon both The Things They Carried and the critical excerpts in this chapter, write an essay laying out your own case. Do you agree with one or another of the critics, or might both sides have missed something? Why and how so?

5. At one point in her essay, Lorrie N. Smith suggests, in passing, that The Things They Carried is "fundamentally an initiation narrative" not unlike those featured in this anthology's "Initiation Stories" album. Write an essay exploring how the story works in these terms, perhaps by comparing this story to at least one other. Who is initiated? Into what? In making your case, be sure to consider the different arguments the critical excerpts in this chapter make, especially about how the story as a whole encourages us to understand and feel about Jimmy Cross's thoughts and actions at the story's end.

6. The Things They Carried opens with the story of the same name, and it ends with "The Lives of the Dead." Write an essay interrelating or comparing the two stories, perhaps by considering some or all of the following questions: How and why exactly might The Things They Carried work and mean differently when read alongside The Lives of the Dead or vice versa? Why and how might The Things They Carried work well as a sort of introduction to a fictional meditation on Vietnam and The Lives of the Dead as a conclusion to one? In these or any terms, what might be the