

Reading Through Displacement: Functionality of the Underlying Theme in Tim  
O'Brien's Fiction

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## ABSTRACT

Tim O'Brien, a contemporary author writing mostly about his combat experience in Vietnam, has written eight books to date. All involve Vietnam in some way—overtly, for the most part. He and his stories are well known stylistically for several traits including the blurred distinctions between what actually happened and “story truth,” something that did not really happen, but is true nonetheless. Within the story, he also blurs the line between what actually happens and what is imagined by the narrator or one of the characters; and, although he sometimes makes the distinction, he often does not. To help shed some light on this, there are a number of published interviews and articles wherein he discusses the themes, forms, and methods of his writing as well as his experiences.

Research and analysis of O'Brien and his works show that, although his stories overtly deal with a myriad of other issues and themes, the complex and specific theme of displacement caused by trauma is present in all of his work, and can even be considered the engine that drives his stories and how they work with the reader. Additionally, O'Brien's well-known method of writing is actually a subtle yet intensely effective performance and enactment of this underlying theme of displacement. When used as a reading strategy, the theme itself clarifies and unlocks several points of contention about his texts such as O'Brien's generally negative treatment of women.

To Rob and all the other Marines of 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon, Bravo Company, 4<sup>th</sup> Combat Engineer Battalion—past, present, and future.

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## Table of contents

Abstract.....	ii
Dedication.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
List of O'Brien's Stories and Chapters by Book.....	vi
Epigraph.....	viii
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2: Trauma-Induced Displacement.....	7
Chapter 3: Performing and Enacting Trauma-Induced Displacement.....	45
Chapter 4: O'Brien and Women.....	81
Chapter 5: Conclusion: The Listening Post.....	99
Works Cited.....	105

Stories/Chapters of *The Things They Carried* and *July, July*

*The Things They Carried*

- “The Things They Carried”
- “Love”
- “Spin”
- “On the Rainy River”
- “Enemies”
- “Friends”
- “How to Tell a True War Story”
- “The Dentist”
- “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong”
- “Stockings”
- “Church”
- “The Man I Killed”
- “Ambush”
- “Style”
- “Speaking of Courage
- “Notes”
- “In the Field”
- “Good Form”
- “Field Trip”
- “The Ghost Soldiers”
- “Night Life”
- “The Lives of the Dead”

*July, July*

1. “Class of ‘69”
2. “July ‘69”
3. “Class of ‘69”
4. “The Streak”
5. “Little People”
6. “Class of ‘69”
7. “Well Married”
8. “Class of ‘69”
9. “Winnipeg”
10. “Class of ‘69”
11. “Hearing”
12. “Class of ‘69”
13. “Loon Point”
14. “Class of ‘69”
15. “Half Gone”
16. “Class of ‘69”
17. “Nogales”
18. “Class of ‘69”

19. "Too Skinny"
20. "Class of '69"
21. "What Went Wrong"
22. "Class of '69"

*“Listen to me, just for a moment. I have to bother you  
With a story about how it feels when the dead speak to me.  
I want to annoy you with the facts.  
They press their faces against the inside of a glass bubble.”  
—Bruce Weigl, “Iraq Drifting, July 2003”*

## Chapter 1: Introduction

*“Almost always, it seems to me, literary explication either ignores or pays scant attention to that which consumes every halfway decent writer—namely, the sound of language. The flow of a sentence. The need for a comma here and not there. The glorious sunset of a well-placed period. The deletion of an ugly clause. The unique adjective that delivers to a noun its vivid singularity—that house and no other house.”*

—Tim O’Brien, “Keynote Address: Thirty Years After”

Right off the bat, I want to acknowledge not only O’Brien’s claim that literary explication fails to recognize the beauty of carefully constructed language in writing, but also O’Brien’s immensely poetic and beautiful writing throughout his various works. I acknowledge this now because, hereafter, I will be purposefully committing this very crime against O’Brien’s writing in an effort to, as O’Brien himself says, “tak[e] the machine apart so as to better understand its workings” (“Keynote Address” 8). Specifically, I will identify a theme I believe is prominently present in all of his writing and show how “the machine” of O’Brien’s writing works to both perform it for, and enact it on, the reader, thus demonstrating its multidimensional functionality. I am calling this theme “trauma-induced displacement,” which is essentially estrangement from other people, society in general, and certain aspects of normal life resulting from some sort of physical or emotional trauma. Although trauma-induced displacement is very similar in principle to what Kalí Tal calls “a combat-induced state of alienation,” it is more important than Tal suggests and not as limited, as it is present throughout all of O’Brien’s writing (“Mind at War” 91). And, not only is “trauma-induced displacement” present throughout O’Brien’s writing, his form and style of writing also perform and enact this very theme. O’Brien accomplishes this by imparting “displaced” effects and/or feelings on the reader through contemporary form and style choices which play largely on blurred distinctions between fact and fiction as well as between actual events and imagined events within the story. Once readers

recognize and understand this theme and how it is performed and enacted, they can read the text through this theme and understand O'Brien's writing on another basic level that in some ways bridges the gap between the author and his work. This level will illuminate a rational and socially important explanation of issues prominent in veterans and other trauma survivors. I will use O'Brien's negative treatment of female characters, and stance towards women in general, to show how reading through this theme unlocks levels of the text previously not addressed. It will also allow us to draw a conclusion about the nature of his writing overall, specifically the intended purpose of his writing. By closely analyzing *The Things They Carried* and *July, July* as a microcosm for O'Brien's collected works, I will show that trauma-induced displacement is a prevalent theme in O'Brien's writing, that O'Brien's form and style perform and enact this theme, and that this can be illustrated by using a trauma-induced displacement reading strategy to unlock another level as to why Tim O'Brien's treatment of female characters and women in general is negative and sometimes hostile.

In the following chapters, I will explore and address all these issues in the following sequence. First I will establish "displacement" resulting from violence and trauma (physical and emotional) as a prevalent, underlying theme throughout O'Brien's works using *The Things They Carried* and *July, July* as representative samples through which one can view all of his works, totaling eight books and some assorted stories and essays. This will include a definition of "displacement" using psychological studies and medical texts to generate a specific set of symptoms. Second, I want to show how the form, style, and overall composition of O'Brien's works reflect, use, perform, and enact this theme for the reader. Third, I will use this method of reading through displacement to understand O'Brien's ill treatment of women in his fiction.

This example will demonstrate how this reading strategy approaches O'Brien's works from a different angle and adds another dimension to the understanding of his writing.

Chapter 2 will discuss the presence of displacement resulting from violence and/or trauma as a prevalent theme in O'Brien's works. Although I will not be discussing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) specifically, I will use the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition (DSM-IV)* and some of the symptoms it lists for PTSD. These symptoms are specific examples of "[p]ersistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma and numbing of general responsiveness," best characterized by "feeling[s] of detachment or estrangement," and "[p]ersistent symptoms of increased arousal," including "irritability or outbursts of anger" (*DSM-IV* 428). With a definition for displacement established, the chapter will outline how O'Brien treats the theme. The identification of "displacement" is not a new step in analysis of O'Brien's work. Tina Chen's article, "'Unraveling the Deeper Meaning': Exile and the Embodied Poetics of Displacement in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*," identifies and discusses displacement, exile, and alienation as predominant themes throughout *The Things They Carried (Things)*. However, Chen focuses much of her analysis on the physical and figurative location relationships to places like Vietnam and America. My work will show another dimension of displacement, relating to constructed and projected relationships and identities altered by physical or emotional trauma, which is left largely unmentioned and unanalyzed. And, whereas Chen (just as most critics) looks only into the presence of these themes in *Things*, I will suggest they are, in fact, present in all of O'Brien's writings.

Chapter 3 will discuss how Tim O'Brien's form and style (which are difficult—if not impossible—to completely separate from each other) perform the theme of displacement for, and enact it on, the reader. The "form" refers to his specific narrative methods and the construction

of his works in regards to traditional genres of published writing, such as the novel, short story, memoir, or essay. It also delves into the blurred distinction between fact and fiction throughout his works. Stylistically, all of O'Brien's works exhibit traits associated with post-modern or contemporary writing that contribute to an inherently confusing flow of information. These traits include fragmentation, unreliable narrators, a consistent use of repetition and revision, and often the absence of an overall plotline.

Additionally, I will talk about the metafictional aspect within O'Brien's writing. Other scholars regularly identify metafiction to some degree in *Things*; however, I will show metafiction's presence in *July, July*, which has thus been overlooked because of its subtlety, and link its presence in both works to O'Brien's performance and enactment of displacement. An aspect related to the autobiographical and metafictional nature of O'Brien's writing is the epistemological nature of O'Brien's works. Some form of "epistemological" appears in almost every article on O'Brien's writing that I researched. Scholars often glaze over it as if it is a given or not functionally important, but I believe that it is. For this reason, I will differentiate between "Tim" the narrator and either "O'Brien" or "Tim O'Brien" the author in my analysis, as some pointedly do not. I make this distinction because, in agreement with Tina Chen, I recognize that there are warranted "distinctions between the narrator and the author that prevent any easy assignment of authorial intention or identity" (Chen 79).

All these aspects of O'Brien's form and style effectively make readers part of the story, giving them a sense of that experience, but keeping them in limbo, unsure of what the experience actually was. In a sense, the writing displaces readers by bringing them along for the ride through the traumatic events, thus giving them that feeling of experience, but denying the reader definitive yes-or-no answers to their questions, or a functional understanding of what happened.

Readers feel as if they understand the traumatic events on an emotional level, but know they do not actually understand, and thus feel that estrangement from the author, the narrator, the characters, and the story itself. Part of this is a subtextual message or goal of O'Brien's writing to communicate that all of these images and experiences are ultimately unable to be communicated—part of the reason for the displacement. Thus Tim O'Brien's form and style perform and enact his prevalent displacement theme.

Chapter 4 will put this strategy of reading through displacement into practice and show how it works. I will specifically address Tim O'Brien's harsh treatment of female characters, and women in general, throughout his writing. Many feminist critics try to reduce *Things* and O'Brien simply to sexist and misogynistic. Others assert that women in the stories are figurative representations of feminine qualities considered dangerous or undesirable in combat. Alex Vernon, addressing "O'Brien's Women" throughout O'Brien's works, does suggest their metaphorical use, citing how they might represent America, but goes beyond metaphors to identify trends and instances that suggest non-incidental negative treatment towards women. By reading *Things* and *July, July* through displacement, I can expand on what previous scholars suggest and identify a deeper and more basic meaning behind O'Brien's treatment of women.

In the conclusion I will discuss some of the residual effects of this reading strategy on O'Brien's works as a whole. Specifically, I will explain why the belief of some scholars, such as Silbergleid, that O'Brien's writing "as a whole implies that the ability to communicate has saved O'Brien" is incorrect in the assumption that it has healed O'Brien in some way (150). While various scholars do accurately describe his works as epistemological and metafictional, they argue that these images, events, memories, and feelings *cannot* be communicated. This coupled with his short essay entitled "We're Too Well Adjusted," wherein he asserts that society does not

feel the effects of Vietnam enough, suggests that his goal is not so much to heal the trauma by retelling and remembering it, but to actually (re-)inflict that trauma on readers. He does this to keep that memory of what happened alive and possibly un-displace veterans by rebuilding the Vietnam veteran community and garnering widespread acceptance for what that community underwent in the 1960s and 70s as well as what they continue to undergo as a result.

## Chapter 2: Trauma-Induced Displacement

*“I came home disconnected and not knowing what I would do with respect to what I’d been through, but knowing I’d do something with it to try to make something good out of this horror called Vietnam.”*

—Tim O’Brien, “Conversation with Tim O’Brien,”  
Writing Vietnam, Writing Life, p. 106

### I. Displacement

If asked, Mark Heberle would say that Tim O’Brien’s writings are all about trauma and Tina Chen would probably link much of it to displacement, which she often terms as “alienation” or “exile.” Though both are right, they both lack a vital piece of the equation. In essence, O’Brien writes about trauma-induced displacement where “displacement” generally refers to a sense of alienation, estrangement, or otherness by characters and/or narrators in relation to people and things, both specific and broad, in the world around them. And this theme of trauma-induced displacement is not just a reoccurring theme in much of O’Brien’s writing. It is *the* driving theme around which the plots and motifs of his stories work, and, therefore, understanding O’Brien’s use of this theme can help readers to better understand his subtextual message. Discussion of it here is important because, 1) although it is prevalent in all of his stories, it is not always obvious or overt, and 2) it suggests a different reading of the text and even larger societal implications involving the understanding of “displaced” persons. I believe this to be true in all of his works, but I will focus here on *The Things They Carried* and *July, July* to illustrate this point.

Before getting into O’Brien’s writing, I first need to outline the basis for displacement and explain the roots of this basis. As my own military service is partly responsible for my noticing O’Brien’s theme of trauma-induced displacement, I believe the theme originates not in O’Brien’s imagination, but in his and others’ experiences. As I see it, trauma-induced

displacement is a common symptom of a serious psychological condition known as Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). It is important to note that I am not trying to establish PTSD as a theme in O'Brien's writing, but rather using the findings and research of the established medical community to help define and support the basis of my definition of the theme. I am choosing to use this method of talking about it (as opposed to simply defining trauma-induced displacement myself) primarily because it establishes the roots of the theme in O'Brien's experience, which will be discussed in depth in the next chapter, and helps establish my interpretation of O'Brien's use of this theme. Because aspects of PTSD so closely represent this theme in O'Brien's writing, I will use the PTSD entry from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: Fourth Edition (DSM-IV)* to define and establish the legitimacy of trauma-induced displacement.

The *DSM-IV*'s definition of PTSD asserts that "[t]he essential feature of [PTSD] is the development of characteristic symptoms following exposure to an extreme traumatic stressor" and that "the person's response [to the stressor] involve[s] intense fear, helplessness, or horror" (424, 428). Given the nature of some of the listed stressors (i.e., death, life threatening illness, witnessing physical harm to another, et cetera), this response is not a stretch of any kind (424). And, since fear, helplessness, and horror are such strong emotional responses, it is not surprising that they can sometimes have residual effects like "[t]he traumatic event [being] persistently reexperienced," "persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma and numbing of general responsiveness (not present before trauma)," and/or "persistent symptoms of increased arousal (not present before trauma)" all of which "significant[ly] distress or [impair] social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning" (*DSM-IV* 428-9). Each of these can manifest itself in several different ways. For instance, events can be "persistently reexperienced"

through “recurrent and intrusive distressing recollections of the event, including images, thoughts, or perceptions,” through “recurrent distressing dreams,” through “acting or feeling as if the traumatic event were recurring (includes a sense of reliving..., illusions, hallucinations, and dissociative flashback episodes, including those on awakening or when intoxicated),” through “intense psychological distress at exposure to internal or external cues that symbolize or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event,” or through “physiological reactivity on exposure to internal or external cues that symbolize or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event” (428). “Persistent avoidance of stimuli” or “numbing” can manifest itself through an “inability to recall an important aspect of the trauma,” through a “markedly diminished interest or participation in significant activities,” through “feeling[s] of detachment or estrangement from others,” and/or through a “sense of a foreshortened future” (428). “Increased arousal” can manifest itself through “difficulty falling or staying asleep,” through “irritability or outbursts of anger,” through “difficulty concentrating,” through “hypervigilance,” or through an “exaggerated startle response” (428). There is more to each than appears here; however, this is the majority of what is listed and the most obviously relevant material.

However, of all the symptoms, the most important for this discussion—“feeling[s] of detachment or estrangement from others”—best defines my use of the term “displacement” on an introductory level (this definition will be refined later in the chapter) and generally sums up the other ways trauma manifests itself and/or shares a cause-and-effect relationship with all other symptoms. For instance, suffering flashbacks, newfound disinterest in “significant activities” like work or school, or irritability would cause detached and estranged feelings towards others not suffering the same symptoms. It would be difficult for someone to feel truly at home in a society of people who are planning their distant life hopes and dreams when he or she does not

expect to live long enough to need such plans due to a sense of a foreshortened future. Similarly, it works the other way around, as one might become excessively irritable because he or she feels estranged. Estrangement is also among the most persistent of the symptoms endured by returning veterans and, since it exists on a personal level within each individual, is not always readily apparent to an observer. Many people seem perfectly normal to those around them but suffer from inner turmoil. This is one reason why this theme of trauma-induced displacement in O'Brien's writing is both incredibly important and often overlooked. Another reason, which I will discuss more later, is that although society regards these traits as symptoms of a disorder, I believe O'Brien subtly suggests that these traits are instead symptomatic of unappreciated and unrecognized perspectives that displace members from society and often build smaller communities with others who appreciate and recognize the alternate perspectives of the world that traumatic experiences create. Basically, O'Brien suggests that his characters are not "messed up" from their experiences in the war but rather that they have achieved another level of understanding beyond the normative scope of society.

## II. Displacement: How and from what?

*"As for the United States, we did not call it 'The World' for nothing; it might as well have been another planet."*

—*Philip Caputo, A Rumor of War*, p. xx

In her article, Tina Chen claims that "the stories in *The Things They Carried* reflect the rootless existence of an exile" and "demonstrate a preoccupation with the nature of displacement and alienation" (79-80). She also focuses, in her article "Unraveling the Deeper Meaning," on geographic places and O'Brien's use of them to illustrate this theme of displacement through "dislocation and reinsertion," seeming to view this theme of displacement through O'Brien's

orientation towards places, both physical and metaphorical (83). Everything and everyone represents some place and every place represents an idea or a larger place. For instance, the pebble Lieutenant Jimmy Cross carries in his mouth in “The Things They Carried” represents Martha, the girl who sent him the pebble, but also the Jersey Shore, where it was found. And, in turn, the Jersey Shore represents America the same way Martha represents America and Cross’s dream of a domesticated life or the basic idea of “home” (85). Chen asserts that

...the eloquence elicited by the exilic experience and by the longing to orient the self toward a place other than where one finds oneself marks O’Brien as a writer who is displaced, if not exiled in a traditional sense. In *Things*, displacement explodes in a doubled movement: the combined impulses of dislocation and reinsertion create the storytelling process. Place as a locus of identity is figured both geographically and metaphorically; Vietnam as imagined and imaginary homeland produces a synchronic process of alienation and return. (83)

For Chen almost everything relates to the distance between two entities. On one hand, she figures displacement through places or locations. On the other hand, Chen figures displacement through physical separation of bodies or body parts. When figuring displacement through places or locations, the push and pull of characters between these places, including “[t]he ne[ed to] redesignate home as a generative location,” creates displacement. In short, characters are separated physically from other people and/or their “homes,” therefore characters are displaced from those other people and/or their homes. Chen asserts that O’Brien creates displacement out of his use of places and figurative bodies to which all the imagery relates. What I would like to show is that rather than the physical distance and the attempt to “[redesignate] [a] home” creating displacement, it is actually relationships metaphorically represented by these places and

ideas of home that create displacement. At one point Chen does acknowledge the metaphorical representation of people by location, but she focuses on how “[t]he necessity of redesignating home as a generative location collides with figurations of the metonymic relationship between body and place” (84). Therefore she bases her figuration of displacement primarily through location, which is a little skewed from true nature of the displacement.

Similarly, when discussing specifically Chen’s figuration of displacement through separations of bodies or body parts, we find that Chen bases these figurations on essentially the same thing: distance. For example, when Tim is wounded and evacuated, Chen says he “is metaphorically amputated” from the platoon (93). Her insight astutely captures the essence of unity men in combat feel towards one another and towards the group in general; however, the implication of her insight is that the distance is what creates displacement. So, again Chen figures displacement not only represented metaphorically by distance but also as caused by distance. While I certainly agree somewhat with the metaphorical representation of displacement, I disagree with distance and separation being the main cause (I will come back to this specific example as well as explain what I believe that man cause to be in the next section of this chapter). Places represent people, and, therefore, physical distance is a metaphor for emotional or psychological distance whereby the attempt to redefine home is actually an attempt to reconcile the emotional or psychological distance. Characters do not figure Vietnam as some type of homeland, but rather as the embodiment of an shared experience that challenges “home’s” intrinsic point of view, which in turn disrupts relationships. The places represent people and their experiences, and the people represent themselves or more complex forms of a relationship between themselves and other characters or society. The difference between the Chen’s and my respective interpretations is that the displacement I address here is more

prevalent, actually drives the story, and centers more on what we might call psychological or emotional distance rather than physical distance resulting in feelings of alienation or exile reflected through the desire to redefine or return “home.”

For instance, most readers will identify the pebble Jimmy Cross carries around in his mouth as representing Martha’s tongue, Martha, the Jersey Shore, and America all at the same time—all things he is physically displaced or removed from due to the great distance between New Jersey and South Vietnam. And, while that is all certainly valid, there is a more basic level to it. Jimmy Cross wants to be *with* Martha physically, emotionally, and romantically, but he cannot because, above all, Martha does not want to be with him. So, as much as that pebble can represent American soil, it more so represents the desired but non-existing relationship between two people, Cross and Martha, rather than two places, Vietnam and America. Cross’s carrying the pebble in his mouth rather than in his pocket, or safely tucked away with her letters in his rucksack, supports this. Carrying the pebble in his mouth—an intimate and personal gesture—represents his truest feelings about Martha, not America. Cross’s displacement exists because Cross wants to be with Martha, but she does not reciprocate those feelings and it leaves Cross displaced from his desires. Really, neither Vietnam the place nor Vietnam the war has anything to do with Cross’s displacement from Martha, just as his presence in Vietnam has nothing to do with his and Martha’s lack of a romantic relationship. The passage in “Things” describing Cross’s and Martha’s date to see *Bonnie and Clyde* clearly illustrates her lack of romantic interest in Cross *prior* to his involvement in Vietnam. Cross touches her knee and “she turn[s] and look[s] at him in a sad, sober way that [makes] him pull his hand back” (4). Furthermore, O’Brien repeatedly describes her with words like “uninvolved” and physical descriptions of eyes that “[are] gray and *neutral*” and an expression on her face that is simply “frank” (*emphasis mine*

17, 4). This clearly illustrates that Vietnam is not to blame for their lack of a romantic relationship. Neither Cross's participation in the war nor the physical distance between Cross and Martha as a result of his presence in Vietnam has anything to do with Martha's lack of romantic interest in Cross. She cares no more and no less about him after his deployment overseas. There is simply no cause-and-effect relationship between Vietnam and Martha's feelings. And, just as Vietnam plays no part in Martha's feelings, neither does Martha, nor her lack of interest in Cross, have any influence on Cross's joining the Army and going to Vietnam. O'Brien even tells us in his story "In the Field" from *Things* that Cross is in Vietnam not because he wanted to be and not because he was drafted. He is there because he signed up for ROTC "his sophomore year...without much thought. An automatic thing: because his friends joined, and ... because it seemed preferable to letting the draft take him" (167-8). Even Cross's reasons for joining show symptoms of displacement in terms of avoidance. Cross joins "because his friends [join]" and because he does not want to be "take[n]" by the draft. He tries to avoid displacement in two ways. First, he attempts to keep activities and involvements in common with his friends. Second, he avoids "letting the draft take him," a statement that implies that he would be taken *away*. This statement's proximity to the statement about his friends forces the implication that it is not entirely a physical "taking" that Cross is avoiding. There is an element of emotional or psychological removal he is attempting to avoid (i.e., displacement).

In actuality, the draft is a greater displacer than the push and pull between places that Chen suggests. The narrator of *Things* details this in "On the Rainy River" when he attempts to flee to Canada to dodge the draft. Tim is trying to avoid the displacement he associates with military service in Vietnam but ironically cannot because the act of draft dodging itself displaces him just as much, if not more so. It is important to note that Tim's reasons for not fleeing to

Canada, even finding himself so close physically (“[t]wenty yards,” close enough to “see tiny red berries on the bushes”) do not include his desire to remain in his homeland (56). He says simply that he “couldn’t risk the embarrassment . . . couldn’t endure the mockery, or the disgrace, or the patriotic ridicule” of all the people he imagines on the far bank (Minnesota side) of the river (59). Thus, his decision to go against his truest feelings are based on how other people will see and react to his actions. This scene would seem to perfectly illustrate the push and pull between two places; however, the deciding factor is not the location or terrain, it is the imagined people on the river bank and their disapproval. This is not to say that place does not figure into O’Brien’s narrative technique, but only that it is a device O’Brien uses to support or reference the more important aspect that defines this theme of displacement: people and their relationships to one another. This is merely one example in a book full of examples, but it is consistent with other examples. O’Brien’s characters in *Things* are displaced from people.

Similarly, O’Brien’s characters in *July, July* reflect this as the entire novel revolves around old college classmates, almost all of whom, like Cross, have an unrequited desire to be with someone else. For instance, Billy McMann, another draftee, who did make it to Canada, wants to be with Dorothy Stier, his college sweetheart, and they in fact make a pact to run away to Canada and start a life together after he receives his draft notice. However, Dorothy does not show at the airport, and, in the ensuing phone call, she explains her failure to board the plane in terms of her relationships to other people. She tells Billy, “‘We’re different people. I’m a Republican, Billy. I’m an American. I can’t help it’” (113). It is her identification to these groups to which she affixes herself that prevents her from eloping, not any aversion she has to “‘[w]earing peasant dresses’” or “‘[l]iving in the woods’” (113). Thus when reading O’Brien’s works, the issue really is not, as Chen says, that Vietnam (or any other place) serves as any type

of “ironic homeland” or “imagined and imaginary homeland,” but that the experiences of the characters in those various places affect their relationships with everyone around them in ways that displace them (81, 83). Therefore the focus is on *what* happens to the characters as the characters’ experiences are the driving factor in the “distance” that exists between them and everyone around them in the stories. The experiences create the displacement.

### III. The Role of Trauma

Of course, the experience I am referring to that creates all this displacement is trauma. And, although the traumas in O’Brien’s writings vary widely from physical to emotional, from individual to group suffering, and from incidental to directed or purposely inflicted, they all create displacement within the characters. Tim O’Brien’s narratives undeniably depict traumatic events of every imaginable kind. However, as Heberle points out, “[t]rauma is not so much the subject of O’Brien’s works as it is the medium within which and out of which his protagonists are impelled to revisit and rewrite their life experiences” (*A Trauma Artist* xxi). It is not so much about what happens in the stories as it is about the residual effects those happenings have on the lives of the characters. Trauma is not the point, but rather the brush and the paint with which the narrator paints the scene. O’Brien’s creative method, his brush, is itself a replication of basic trauma therapy, the core tenant of which is “to communicate to others an ineffable wounding” (Heberle, *A Trauma Artist* xxi). His subject matter, his paint, reflects his status as a trauma victim behind the veil of various narrators. The constant usage and presence of this method and subject matter explain Heberle’s astute labeling O’Brien as a “trauma writer,” not a Vietnam writer (*A Trauma Artist* xix).

The simplest way to look at this is to note that no major, dynamic character exists in O'Brien's writing without enduring some kind of trauma.<sup>1</sup> Tim's own experience is a good example. "The Ghost Soldiers," starts with Tim suffering the physical trauma of being shot before suffering the indignity of watching Jorgensen, the medic who had almost let Tim die, "fit in very nicely, all smiles and group rapport" in the platoon from which Tim now finds himself displaced (218, 203). Tim's experience illustrates how trauma induces a character's displacement a couple of different ways. First, Tim is shot—physical trauma—and leaves the front line via evacuation, or forced displacement ("exile," as Tina Chen would say). Second, as Tim heals physically, he fails to maintain his legitimacy as a member of the platoon because he is not present during the continuing traumatic experience of combat after his evacuation. Tina Chen asserts this point, saying that "the narrator's sense of alienation and exile stems from his separation from his platoon" (93). It is, however, not just the physical proximity. Tim "fe[els] a new sense of separation" because his absence makes him "a civilian. [He] forfeit[s] membership in the family, the blood fraternity, and no matter how hard [he] tr[ies], [he] can't pretend to be part of it" (*Things* 194). Tim reinforces this when he relays a conversation he has with Mitchell Sanders (who is constantly looking for morals to stories) upon the platoon's return to the base where Tim is recuperating:

Sanders shrugged. "People change. Situations change. I hate to say this, man, but you're out of touch. Jorgenson—he's *with* us now."

"And I'm not?"

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<sup>1</sup> The only notable, named character in *Things* that is not given such a dimension is Azar, who is, quite frankly, simply bad and morally undefined. Azar's purpose in *Things* seems to be to support the development or the moral orientation of other characters. For instance, when Azar kills Ted Lavendar's puppy O'Brien defines the morals of others by contrasting their feelings or views about a specific incident or situation to those of Azar. In other places, O'Brien uses Azar to support character development by having other characters align or dis-align themselves with Azar. Azar, although a fairly prominent character, does not qualify as a *main* character. He serves only as a point of contrast to those main characters who are displaced by some type of trauma.

Sanders looked at me for a moment.

“No,” he said. “I guess you’re not.”

Stiffly, like a stranger, Sanders moved across the hootch and lay down with a magazine and pretended to read.

I felt something shift inside me ... (197-8).

Tim, the narrator, finds himself displaced not so much because of his lack of physical proximity to the platoon for an extended period of time, but rather because that distance makes it impossible for Tim to share any recent experiences with the platoon. They have been participating in combat and enduring trauma—hence the “*blood* fraternity”—while he has not. He is now “out of touch” and therefore no longer “*with*” them as a result. Previously, Tim shared those experiences and was appropriately “*with*” them. While it is impossible to conclude that physical separation does not factor at all into displacement, O’Brien does illustrate how a difference in traumatic experience trumps physical separation. During Tim’s interactions with Cross in “Love” and Bowker in “Speaking of Courage,” the narrator and the other character reconnect after years apart. In both instances, the time apart does not inhibit Tim from connecting with Bowker or Cross, nor does it inhibit Bowker or Cross from connecting with Tim, because their time apart is not during a war, and thus no one is missing a shared traumatic experience. In her claims that disembodiment through “[metaphorical] amputat[ion]” (such as Tim from his platoon in “The Ghost Soldiers”) creates displacement (Chen 93), Chen fails to explicitly connect Tim’s displacement to its predominant cause: the continuation of traumatic experience without his presence. Although physical proximity probably does factor somewhat, it is predominantly the difference between the platoon’s and O’Brien’s trauma-soaked experiences that creates the displacement.

The use of traumatic experiences to create trauma is the same in O'Brien's war stories as in his stories removed from the immediate subject of the Vietnam War, an aspect Tina Chen does not account for as her article deals only with *The Things They Carried*, which is explicitly about the Vietnam War. The "Half Gone" chapter of *July, July* illustrates this very well. The main character, Dorothy Stier, who from all appearances has generally been happy with her husband, Ron, for decades since leaving Billy McMann, finds herself unable to connect with her husband anymore due to her breast cancer and subsequent amputation of one breast. Both cancer and amputation definitely constitute traumatic experiences on emotional and physical levels (even being referred to as a "nightmare" by the 3<sup>rd</sup> person limited narrator imbedded in Dorothy's point of view), neither of which her husband seems to have undergone—at least not in a manner similar enough to avoid the disconnect they suffer as a result (193). Instead, Ron constantly polishes two Volvos he calls "[t]he twins" when he is unwilling to look at or touch his naked wife (189, 192). The use of "twins" is an obvious reference to common colloquial term describing a woman's breasts. Therefore Ron's constant touching of his "twins" (the cars) when he is unwilling to look at or touch his wife's remaining "twin" (her breast) plays as denial, wherein he replaces Dorothy's breasts with the cars. In doing so, he fails to appropriately acknowledge Dorothy's trauma. This reading is consistent with Dorothy's description of his involvement in the "cancer nightmare" as "can-do solicitude" and "cheerlead[ing]. Rah-rahing the oncologists, rooting for the cure, clapping his hands and purring, 'Atta girl,' as she puked out the chemo poisons" (193-4). His relationship to her cancer is essentially the same as a cheerleading squad to a football team. Cheerleading squads are, of course, not actually necessary to, or part of, a football team. In fact, cheerleaders do not even interact with the team at all. They cheer *to* the audience of the game, not the participants. They are merely bystanders

and not at all involved with what happens on the field. The same is apparently true of Ron, who Dorothy claims the cancer “rob[s] [her] of” “along with the killer breast” and “a decent sex life” (194). As Ron and Dorothy remain married and living under one roof, the claim of being “robbed of” her husband refers to emotional or psychological removal, resulting in feelings of displacement in contrast to the physical removal of her “killer breast” or her “sex life,” which is a physical manifestation of the displacement she feels from Ron as a result of her traumatic experience. Traumatic experiences induce the displacement all of O’Brien’s major characters suffer from.

#### IV. Displacement Unites and Aids Understanding

*“I have also attempted to describe the intimacy of life in infantry battalions, where the communion between men is as profound as any between lovers. Actually, it is more so. It does not demand for its sustenance the reciprocity, the pledges of affection, the endless reassurances required by the love of men and women. It is, unlike marriage, a bond that cannot be broken by a word, by boredom or divorce, or by anything other than death. Sometimes even [death] is not strong enough ... Such devotion, simple and selfless, the sentiment of belonging to each other, was the one decent thing we found in a conflict otherwise notable for its monstrosities.”*

— Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War*, p. xvii

O’Brien highlights the displacement Dorothy and Ron feel from one another, due to the traumatic experience they did not mutually share by establishing a friendship between Dorothy and her neighbor, Fred Engelman. Fred is a retiree from the United States Marine Corps who O’Brien tells us “[y]ears ago as a Marine in Vietnam ... had been affiliated in some cryptic way with the Phoenix Program” (194). This, of course, means he was involved in assassinating important enemy personnel, which Fred describes as “[s]imple as pie once you get the hang of it” (194). Killing and death are traumatic any way you look at it, whether it is killing, being killed, almost being killed, or simply being in close proximity to someone else being killed. As

if proof of this is needed, Fred asserts this when he says “once you get the hang of it,” thus implying that before getting the hang of it, it is difficult. And I strongly believe the implied meaning is difficult emotionally or psychologically; otherwise he would qualify how it is difficult. Because he does not qualify it, the assumption is he does not need to because it is understood, as killing would be understood to be emotionally difficult and/or traumatic in general by American society. However, Fred has become so accustomed to traumatic experiences and environments that he now regards them as “simple as pie.” Fred’s close and extensive relationship to trauma and traumatic environments makes Dorothy’s interactions with him meaningful.

O’Brien explains the essence of Dorothy’s and Fred’s friendship by telling readers how, [f]or ten years, almost eleven, [Dorothy] and Fred Engelmann had been the closest of friends, ... They laughed a good deal. They enjoyed each other. More than that, Fred seemed to understand [Dorothy] exactly as Dorothy most wanted to be understood ... it was as if the man had unlocked the code of her personal history, developed a dossier on her dreams: certain regrets and longings. Forks in the road. Missed opportunities ... (194)

The one thing that allows Fred to connect with Dorothy where Ron cannot is that shared experience of some kind of trauma, even if it was not the exact same experience. Whereas Ron will not look at her chest (where she has one remaining breast and a scar where the other was removed), Fred is described as “stud[ying] her chest, not coldly, not indifferently” (195). This indicates that he is not repressing the issue. Also, Ron is overcome with embarrassment at her appearance outside and topless and asks her to return to the house to cover herself. When Dorothy later suggests the same thing to Fred, he simply says, “Negative, let ‘er rip. Talk”

because he recognizes that a) she needs to talk to someone, and b) talking is what she has come over to his yard to do (195). Fred recognizes that any implicit approval of Dorothy covering her scarred chest will invite or encourage her emotional suppression of her feelings by implicitly encouraging the physical suppression of her scars. Dorothy does not cover herself, instead opening up and talking to Fred in a way that she is completely unable to talk to Ron as a result of the difference in his and Dorothy's personal experiences with trauma. This situation illustrates why trauma is the brush and the paint, but *not the point*. Trauma creates displacement, and displacement is the driving factor in O'Brien's stories. In this way, trauma becomes the medium through which characters either do or do not become displaced from one another, society, and themselves. Trauma-induced displacement is the underlying theme to O'Brien's writing.

Tim illustrates this in *Things* when Linda, a girl he goes on a date with when he is nine, is suffering from cancer. Tim (age 9) unknowingly makes an insensitive comment about the hat she always wears and later fails to help her when the hat is snatched from her head, revealing her bald scalp as a result of chemotherapy. In telling this story in "Lives of the Dead," Tim (adult) is reflecting back with a sense of understanding after having dealt with trauma and death in Vietnam. Tim describes the date during which they watched a movie depicting a dead body dumped into the ocean and how,

[e]ven now, I can remember the awful splash as that corpse fell into the sea. I remember glancing over at Linda, thinking it might be too much for her, but in the dim gray light she seemed to be smiling at the screen ... *I couldn't understand it.* There was nothing to smile at. Once or twice in fact, I had to close my eyes ...  
*(emphasis mine 232)*

Clearly, at this point Tim (age 9) did not understand something Linda did. However, his reflection back on this moment indicates that he now does understand. Tim goes on to say how he “want[s] to save Linda’s life” and that “[i]n Vietnam ... we had ways of making the dead seem not quite so dead” (236, 238). This indicates that his experience in Vietnam, specifically with dead people and death in general, makes him able to understand Linda and her story. Appropriately, one of the more common ways the soldiers of *Things* deal with death is through a “developed ... sense of humor” (226). Sometimes it is done through stories, like the segment of “How to Tell a True War Story” that retells when Curt Lemon went trick-or-treating, in the middle of the night, naked and painted like a ghost, in a Vietnamese village (239-40). Sometimes it is done through humorous comments that combatants find funny or pleasing, but would make non-combatants shudder, much like Linda’s smiling at the dumping of a dead body in the ocean. Her positive reaction to the dumping of the body is much like the opening passage from “Spin” in *Things*,

The war wasn’t all terror and violence. Sometimes things could almost get sweet. For instance, I remember a little boy with a plastic leg. I remember how he hopped over to Azar and asked for a chocolate bar—“GI number one,” the kid said—and Azar laughed and handed over the chocolate. When the boy hopped away, Azar clucked his tongue and said, “War’s a bitch.” He shook his head sadly. “One leg for Crissake. Some poor fucker ran out of ammo.” (31)

Tim, the narrator, implies his approval of Azar’s statement/joke by using it as the example of how “things could almost get sweet.” He does not tell us if anyone, including himself, laughs at the comment, but his approval parallels Linda’s smile, and that is really all the reader needs to verify Linda’s and Tim’s reactions or recognitions of some level of humor that society would

deem “inappropriate.” Even more than a recognition of humor, Linda’s smiling at that scene in the movie is a recognition of death, illustrated by the reaction to a corpse. Linda smiles when the body goes overboard in the movie, whereas Tim hides his eyes. In “Things,” Tim talks about “kick[ing] corpses” and “cut[ting] off thumbs” as typical events during the war (20). The casual manner Tim addresses these actions with stands in sharp contrast to Tim’s reflection on his “fourth day” in Vietnam when he “hadn’t yet developed a sense of humor,” and he suffers an immediate and powerful “moist sickness” when the other members of the platoon shake hands with and talk to a corpse killed in an airstrike (226). This example, along with Tim’s narration throughout *Things*, illustrates his belated understanding and acceptance of the things Linda understands and accepts directly due to his traumatic experiences in Vietnam. It therefore also illustrates the elimination of the emotional and psychological ‘distance’ they experience due to their respective points of view that initially separate them and make for the awkward silence in the car on the way to the movie.

## V. Displacement: A Central and Driving Theme

This theme is not isolated to the examples explained here—I could have conceivably opened either *Things* or *July, July* (or any other work of O’Brien’s for that matter) to any page and identified an example. And it is, in fact, more than just a reoccurring theme. Trauma-induced displacement drives the narratives of O’Brien’s works. Every story either introduces the trauma that has caused the displacement, shows the displacement that has been caused and its effects, or shows a combination of the two. Sometimes the trauma is specific, and sometimes it is just generally “war.” Sometimes the characters are displaced from specific people, sometimes themselves, and sometimes society as a whole (i.e., America). Whatever the case, without it, the

stories do not exist—the books themselves dissolve into nothing. Trauma-induced displacement drives O’Brien’s works because his writing indexes the plethora of ways in which individuals experience displacement. It also suggests a different manner of looking at displacement as not the symptom of a “disorder” but as achievement of another level of understanding.

Imagine a graph with an X and a Y axis. The X axis represents physical location and the Y axis represents time. If two people’s coordinates share the same X value and the same Y value, they find themselves at the same place at the same time—for instance, something general like Vietnam in 1968 or something specific like room 242 in Shanks Hall at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, VA on January 1, 2011 at 1:00 PM. This coordinate represents how we as a society “normally” see and interpret the world. If two people share the same coordinate, they will share similar or identical experiences and likely a similar or identical point of view. It is this shared point of view on a two-dimensional plane that O’Brien’s displacement theme challenges.

O’Brien is suggesting not so much an agreement on the symptoms of a disorder but a challenge to its being considered a “disorder” at all. The term disorder explicitly inspires a negative connotation. “Disorder” equals “un-ordered,” “unorganized,” and “chaotic.” It implies that our society inherently and correctly identifies any deviation from the norm as a problem. O’Brien’s writing suggests that displacement is not so much a disorder as it is an ability to interpret the world differently—a different point of view.

In essence, O’Brien adds a discursive Z axis to the graph, wherein one’s location in relation to Z is determined by one’s displacement (from the norm) as caused by some type of trauma. Here displacement represents one’s values, experiences, and perceptions as it differs from the zero-zero point—(0,0)—where all three axes meet. Note that it is not the zero-zero-zero point—(0,0,0)—, as would be mathematically appropriate for a graph with three axes

because recognizing another's displacement as "disorder" (even if they do not use that word) is also a lack of recognition that a valid Z axis exists. What this lack of recognition implies is that those who belong to the norm exist on a two-dimensional plane, wherein they recognize anything that does not exist on that plane as "the other," "wrong," or "invalid." It also implies that some people live in a three-dimensional field wherein they recognize the validity of some, if not all, of the other possible points of view. This comparison also highlights the reason for my selecting the term "displacement" as opposed to "estrangement," which I suggested earlier as a kind of preliminary definition for displacement. One connotation of displacement that estrangement does not share is that who or what is being displaced is, in effect, being forcefully moved away from something. Estrangement notes only a difference or distance, but does not suggest the forceful creation of that difference or distance. In O'Brien's writing, characters are being displaced from the norm and the 'normal' perception of the world to alternate perceptions and understandings of the world *due to traumatic events*.

## VI. Displacement as Commentary

Those living in the three-dimensional field are there because something happens that pushes them away from the zero value on the Z axis. Thus the traumatic experience of one person causes him or her to understand the world in terms other than those defined by "the norm"—society's two-dimensional interpretation of the world. This plays to the other reason this theme of trauma-induced displacement is so important, because it can also be seen as a critical commentary on society and other entities from which characters in O'Brien's works are displaced. In essence, the writing represents not only the displacement itself, along with its cause(s), but also suggests that the alternate perceptions and understandings of the world that

result from trauma are also valid. A good example of this is Fred Engelmann and his ability to respect, accept, and communicate with Dorothy Stier on that basis when Dorothy's husband is incapable. And, as Dorothy's divergence from Ron and the lack of divergence from Fred represent the central conflict and point of "Half Gone," the trauma and the displacement are firmly grounded at the root of the story. The trauma and resulting displacement are therefore what drives the story at its core. An awareness of rising and falling action within the plot is not important to understand the story. Rather the theme of trauma-induced displacement, which the plot establishes or illustrates, is vitally important to understand the story. This theme forms the core of O'Brien's writing. It brings characters together when it is shared and drives them apart when it is not. O'Brien's characters do things because of the trauma, or they are the way they are because of trauma inflicted on them. In "The Ghost Soldiers," Tim seeks revenge against Jorgenson because Jorgenson does not come to his aid right away, forgets to treat for shock, and, as a result, Tim finds himself displaced from his normative day-to-day surroundings. Norman Bowker cannot reconcile his experience in Vietnam in "Speaking of Courage" (specifically Kiowa's death if one event had to be pin-pointed) with the American society he returns to. Readers later discover that after spending several years isolated and secluded Bowker kills himself. Tim discloses and tells about Bowker's suicide in the following story, "Notes." In "The Lives of the Dead" Tim does not understand Linda or her smile until experiencing death and corpses first-hand in the Vietnam War. In the chapter "Half Gone" of *July, July*, Dorothy confronts her husband topless, outside, and in broad daylight because he will not touch or look at her after surviving breast cancer. Without trauma-induced displacement, all of these stories would cease to exist in any cohesive or understandable form.

Similarly, *July, July*'s David Todd is displaced from pretty much everyone as a result of his service in Vietnam, which results in the amputation of one of his legs. "July '69" describes David Todd right away as being "a world away, in the mountains west of Chu Lai . . . , badly wounded, thinking *Dear God*, listening to people die all around him" (21). At this point his platoon has just been ambushed and massacred while a small transistor radio continues broadcasting the *Apollo 11* moon landing "at a spot in the universe called the Sea of Tranquility" (22). This highlights David Todd's plight and displacement quite well as in mid-July 1969 almost everyone would be listening to and focused on the peaceful and happy moon landing, not on the Vietnam War. The world (society, everyone) is simply aloof to what is happening to Todd in the violent "mountains west of Chu Lai" where his entire platoon has died in a horrific, traumatic ambush "making *animal* noises" (*emphasis mine* 22). In contrast, society is focused on the height of *human* achievement illustrated through the events transpiring at "the Sea of Tranquility." Society will never understand what David Todd has undergone—most, in fact, will never even know. This experience drives a wedge between David and Marla Dempsey, the woman he dates in college and marries after his return from Vietnam. They eventually divorce when Marla leaves David on Christmas morning ten years after his wounding (231). O'Brien outlines the makings of their principle problem in the "July '69" chapter of *July, July*. Before joining the Army, David Todd, hoping to play professional baseball, finds himself unable "to instruct Marla in some of the finer points of baseball: . . . She had trouble caring . . . Marla would listen, and nod, but in the end she would remember nothing" (28-9). Her inability to care about "men and their macho games" "frighten[s] [David Todd]" (28-9). The narrator tells us that in 1975, they get in a fight and David makes it clear that this inability to communicate his traumatic experiences has affected their relationship when he says, "[she] do[es]n't understand. Nothing.

If [he] trie[s] to explain, if [he] start[s] to explain—” but finds himself unable to even finish the thought (276). Instead he “rap[s] his knuckles against the prosthesis” and says, ““See that? Chop off a leg, watch sixteen guys die, smell the rot. See if you don’t cuss in your sleep”” (276). He later gets angry at her inability to say anything in response and reads this as confirmation of what “frighten[s] him” in college about her inattention to, and uncaring about, ““what [he’s] good at”” (28). Here the inability to communicate the traumatic experience actually creates much of the displacement. And, conversely, it allows David to actually share a moment of understanding with Dorothy Stier on the common ground of amputations during the reunion as they “compar[e] prostheses and agree that ““Nam and putrid breast cancer”” are the “[s]ame”” (263). This includes calling the purple scars on her chest a ““Purple Stinking Heart,”” a slight play on the name of the medal David Todd received for his amputation (263). They find commonality in each other as they feel distance from everyone else because ““nobody gives a hot stinking darn, do they? They’ve all got their ouchies, their little dings and boo-boos. Stubbed their toes on love. Bruised souls, mangled egos, et cetera ...”” (263). By referring to everyone else’s problems as “dings and boo-boos” they marginalize everyone else in relation to themselves on the basis of the severe trauma they have undergone. This, the fact that “nobody gives a hot stinking darn,” also mirrors David’s immediate problem with Marla, her inability to show interest in baseball which he reads as uncaring about his all of experiences and what he is all about. In the end, like everyone else, David Todd’s story runs entirely on displacement he suffers as a result of his traumatic experiences. Displacement destroys his marriage and, at the same time, it creates a bond with another survivor. Thus displacement creates a community separate from society and both displaces and unites individuals simultaneously.

This incident is not isolated, though. In fact, after Marla leaves David and they divorce, David “[takes] up with his psychiatrist” (281). But, it lasts only a short time, and Master Sergeant Johnny Ever, a voice that incessantly speaks to David starting the day he is wounded in Vietnam, remains. The psychiatrist, who David had spoken to extensively about his experience in the war, tells him that Johnny Ever is ““a figment”” of David’s imagination (281). In the end, despite the psychiatrist’s willingness to listen to David tell of his experience, her inability to fully comprehend prevents their becoming truly *close* or remain involved for more than a short period of time. Johnny Ever, who represents the idea of someone who does fully know David Todd, remains despite David’s annoyance that “Master Sergeant Johnny Ever w[o]n’t shut the fuck up, the guy k[eeeps] babbling about this and that and all things between” (260). No one else can understand as Johnny Ever can, and so they are never allowed to know the full story or understand it. It is this very thing that keeps David Todd and the others displaced respectively. Trauma-induced displacement drives each character’s actions and makes them who they are. And, because O’Brien does this with all of his notable, dynamic characters who readers often sympathize with, it implies that his writing is a suggestion of the validity of the alternate points of view that ‘normal’ society views as symptoms of a ‘disorder.’

Even aside from trauma-induced displacement bearing a remarkable resemblance to symptoms of a recognized psychological disorder, society clearly views this issue as completely problematic. For instance, Rand Corporation research is briefly quoted in Stew Magnuson’s article “Combat Stress.” The research links specific physical and psychological symptoms to often more recognizable effects, such as ““[impaired] relationships, [disrupted] marriages, [aggravated]...difficulties of parenting and...problems in children”” (qtd. in Magnuson 40). Words like “disrupted,” “impaired,” “aggravated,” “difficulties,” and “problems” clearly

illustrate that society looks at these psychological symptoms as something that is “broken” and therefore must be “fixed.” O’Brien litters his texts with examples that reflect society’s stance on the issue. David Todd’s displacement from Marla, which prevents their effective communication and prompts their divorce, would be more popularly read as a social or psychological problem on David’s end. *He* is unable to talk to her, so it is *his problem*. Mark Heberle cites O’Brien’s Vietnam writing as “post-traumatic figurations of a primal scene that can never be fully understood or fully healed” and alludes to Judith Herman’s use of “excerpts [from *Things*] in her magisterial study of *Trauma and Recovery* as if the stories were case histories” (“Speaking of Trauma” 67). Clearly, the prevailing school of thought regarding O’Brien’s writing is that it is representative “of the disorder[, PTSD]” (Heberle, “Speaking of Trauma” 67). However, if we view these elements that scholars see as representative of PTSD as I think O’Brien is presenting them, his writing reads differently. David exists in the three-dimensional field with a value for the Z axis because he sustains a traumatic experience and, as a result, is displaced. This means he has an alternate point of view—a different perception or understanding—of the world than that of the norm. Marla, in comparison, exists on the two-dimensional plane with only X and Y values and understands the world in terms of the norm. According to the norm, David is wrong or not appropriately seeing and interacting with the world. However, if we question the abstract idea of a norm, as I believe O’Brien is doing, David’s point of view is merely different. The central issue to David’s and Marla’s inability to communicate is Marla’s lack of recognition of David’s point of view as valid. If she is unwilling to see it as anything but wrong from the beginning, how can David ever hope to explain it to her? It becomes impossible to explain a traumatic experience because either the listener is unwilling to consider the speaker’s point of

view, the listener is incapable of understanding because he or she is not privy to the speaker's point of view, or a combination thereof.

The significance of the listener's ability and willingness to understand is important to note since O'Brien is capable of seeing this issue from both sides. Obviously, he has a basis for understanding displacement and trauma. His service in Vietnam and constant writing about it make no question of that issue. However, O'Brien is also the son of a man who not only "served on a destroyer off the coasts of Okinawa and Iwo Jima during the two major Pacific campaigns" in World War II and tells O'Brien "numerous war stories" about the experience, but who was also later "institutionalized for his alcoholism" (Herzog, *Tim O'Brien* 6, 9). I am not trying to establish a definite link between O'Brien's father's alcoholism and military service, but rather suggesting that, as alcoholism is common among returning veterans, O'Brien might have dealt first-hand and day-to-day with some of these issues from the uncomprehending point of view of the societal norm during the first two decades of his life. In reference to his father's alcoholism, Herzog notes that "[O'Brien] longed for some radical change in his father's behavior" (*Tim O'Brien* 9). This, at the very least, suggests the possibility that there were other aspects of his father's behavior symptomatic of displacement that O'Brien, who, at that time, would see the situation through the societal point of view, wanted to change. This plus his own service would grant O'Brien a not necessarily unique but certainly comprehensive and multidimensional understanding of displacement.

## VII. Trauma-induced Displacement vs. Popular Themes

Now, one could reasonably argue that my discussion of trauma-induced displacement is a mere rehashing and renaming of commonly identified themes in O'Brien's writing with the

trauma added. *Sparknotes* even names “loneliness and isolation” as one of the major motifs and “physical and emotional burdens” as one of the major themes in *The Things They Carried* (“Themes, Motifs, and Symbols”). In his book *Tim O’Brien*, even Tobey Herzog, a notably more respected source than *Sparknotes*, identifies “the theme of loneliness and isolation” as one central to O’Brien’s writing (4). “Alienation” can definitely be termed as a kind of isolation or loneliness. What I am suggesting here is different in two ways. First, trauma-induced displacement is more than just a common theme or motif—it is the uniting theme within O’Brien’s writing that drives the story. Second, there is a difference between being isolated or alone and being displaced. I have already briefly mentioned how the traumatic events and the resulting displacement drive the stories and the characters themselves. However, thus far, I have not distinguished between isolation and displacement.

Isolation and displacement differ in a few key ways, notably the distinction that “displaced” does not necessarily mean “isolated” and the wider variety of entities one can be displaced from, but not isolated from. The first difference is the specificity that isolation and loneliness constitute. A displaced character is not necessarily alone in the world or isolated. He or she often is, but not necessarily. For instance, although the main characters in *Things* and *July, July* are displaced, they often find community with others who have undergone similar traumas. Kalí Tal points out that the “[l]iterature of trauma . . . is the product of three coincident factors: the experience of trauma, the urge to bear witness, and a sense of community (“Speaking the Language of Pain” 217-8). It is actually the shared “experience of trauma” that creates the “sense of community.” Tim *truly* becomes a member of the platoon sometime after his first experience in Vietnam when the platoon shakes hands with the corpse. He was not truly a member at that moment because everyone else has undergone something he has not. It is

apparent, though not specifically stated, that O'Brien shares enough traumatic experience with the platoon to become a true member, as *Things* is written from an insider's point of view, not an outsider's point of view. Similarly, the characters of *July, July* find community with one another during the reunion based on traumatic experiences that often mirror each other. But, in finding another who has undergone the same or similar trauma, they actually increase their displacement to everyone else. For instance, David Todd and Dorothy Stier "bear witness" to their individual traumas, simultaneously commiserating over their amputations, "enjoy[ing] a meeting of minds," but it is very important to note that they do not do so in the actual reunion (Tal, "Speaking..." 217; *July, July* 262). Instead they leave the gymnasium and retreat to the men's bathroom to do drugs (261). It is there they have the conversation through which they voice their marginalization of others' traumas and problems as "little dings and boo-boos" (263). So, although displacement does essentially entail exclusion in some way from a community or group, it often is not necessarily an isolated exclusion because displacement creates alternate communities separate from society.

However, displacement does at times entail isolation for a character. This is most evident with Norman Bowker in "Speaking of Courage," who, after returning from Vietnam, cannot hold a job or rejoin the community that he grew up in. Instead, he endlessly circles the lake in his father's pick-up truck. Bowker epitomizes an isolated character. He is unable to speak to even his father and instead fantasizes about it. However, his isolation is a symptom or *a result of* his displacement. Bowker clearly identifies and feels comfortable with Tim and, the reader can safely assume, the other members of the platoon. So, even though Bowker suffers from intense feelings of isolation, his intense loneliness is clearly not the root of his problems, but a result of them. Appropriately, the narrator tells us in "Notes," which immediately follows "Speaking of

Courage,” that Bowker later hangs himself in the locker room of a local YMCA during the water break of a pick-up basketball game with “his friends” (160). Even in the moment immediately preceding his greatest isolating act, he is engaged in a social activity. And it is not an act of loneliness, but rather an outward expression of his inability to communicate his feelings.

Bowker even tells Tim to write his story in a letter, explaining that,

“I’d write it myself except I can’t ever find any words, if you know what I mean, and I can’t figure out what exactly to *say*. Something about the field that night.

The way Kiowa just disappeared into the crud. You were there—you can tell it.”

(157)

Tim’s and Bowker’s shared traumatic experience the night their friend, Kiowa, dies establishes community between Tim and Bowker, so much so that Bowker entrusts the telling of *his* story to Tim. Bowker writes Tim the unsolicited letter in which he explains his story and suggests that Tim write it. This is an important detail, as Bowker’s mother tells the narrator that “[t]here was no suicide note, no message of any kind” for anyone—not his family and not the friends he was playing basketball with just moments before stringing himself up with a jump rope (160). All of this indicates that Norman Bowker’s central problem is his inability to communicate or feel at home with those who do not share his experiences. He says it himself in the letter: ““This guy wants to talk about it, but he *can’t*” because there is no one around that “w[as] there” (157). Therefore, displacement sometimes yields isolation, but isolation itself is not the issue.

### VIII. Other types of Displacement

Not only is isolation not the central issue in itself, but the aspect of displacement that isolation represents is overly simplified and rather misleading. Isolation and loneliness are

essentially not being around other people, either physically or emotionally. However, much of the displacement that Tim O'Brien writes about is not necessarily displacement from "other people" per se. Yes, much of the displacement is a sense of estrangement from other people (sometimes groups and sometimes specific individuals), but that is not all it is. There are several instances of a sense of displacement from one's self, many from society in general, and even some from what is "real." In "The Ghost Soldiers" and again in "The Lives of the Dead," the narrator displays a great sense of displacement from himself, specifically in his perception of himself. When Tim's desire for revenge against Bobby Jorgenson appalls Tim in "The Ghost Soldiers," he claims that,

Something had gone wrong. I'd come to this war a quiet, thoughtful sort of person, a college grad, Phi Beta Kappa and summa cum laude, all the credentials, but after seven months in the bush I realized that those high, civilized trappings had somehow been crushed under the weight of the simple daily realities. I'd turned mean inside. Even cruel at times. For all my education, all my fine liberal values, I now felt a deep coldness inside me, something dark and beyond reason. It's a hard thing to admit, even to myself, but I was capable of evil. (200)

This passage illustrates Tim's realization of who he has become. Also, the passage demonstrates how Tim feels estranged from his perception of himself, his perception being that of his pre-Vietnam self. He lists the accomplishments and experiences of his life before Vietnam as a definition of who he was before going to Vietnam, contrasting them to who he has become, and shedding light on his belief that the two do not jibe. This passage shows the conflict between the society's zero-zero interpretation of the world that Tim identifies his pre-Vietnam self with and his newly realized point of view (which he still seems unready to fully accept). Similarly,

after seeing the corpse everyone shakes hands with on his fourth day, Tim talks with Kiowa, who tells him “[t]hat shaking hands crap ... isn’t decent,” but that “[he]’ll get used to it” (227). Here Kiowa both acknowledges Tim’s feelings about essentially taunting the corpse and informs Tim that he will change in the same manner as everyone around him. Tim does change and towards the end of his tour is, at times, vengeful and cruel despite everything he believes and values, and despite his honorable upbringing. As his language suggests, he views this incident as very negative and disturbing. The transformation amazes him because he changes so much and seems to not realize it until the transformation is complete. The transformation and its realization leaves Tim with only a memory/perception of how and who he was before the war, from which he feels very displaced. Later in “The Ghost Soldiers” Tim writes about this struggle again and how “[he] tr[ies] to hang on to [his] own life, that gentle, naïve kid [he] used to be, but ... [he] know[s] for a fact that [he] can’t ever bring any of it back again” (210). Tim’s focus on who he used to be and the struggle it causes clearly and explicitly illustrates an individual’s displacement from his or herself via that individual’s perceptions of who he or she used to be. This form of displacement embodies a basic identity struggle that—one could argue—O’Brien’s books exist to reconcile for O’Brien. Displacement from one’s self is a very important aspect of the driving theme of trauma-induced displacement.

Additionally, O’Brien’s work indicates other types of displacement, such as displacement from society as a whole and even from reality. Norman Bowker best exemplifies displacement from society as he writes to Tim in “Notes” that the course work at the junior college he enrolls in “seems too abstract, too distant, with nothing real or tangible at stake” (155). School is an accepted part of American society (as it is in most of the developed world), and although students often complain that they will never need what they are learning, they seldom complain

of basic education as being completely “abstract” or “[in]tangible.” Furthermore, Bowker has profound difficulty “finding a meaningful use for his life after the war,” which demonstrates a rejection of the basic things one is expected to do (and be fulfilled doing) in American society, such as getting married, having kids, and working in some capacity (155). If he rejects the things a society values, he essentially displaces himself from acceptance in that society. Even in the diverse and “open-minded” world many boast we live in today, we still look strangely on someone who, for example, does not work, get married, and have kids. It is acceptable and “okay” to not do everything society values, but to reject most of or all of society’s tenants is grounds for exclusion to some degree, and therefore displacement. All such a rejection actually indicates is a set of values weighted differently than that of society—an alternate point of view—but the result is a notably displaced feeling from society.

Bowker also demonstrates displacement from “reality” when he claims that his issue with school is that “nothing [is] real or tangible.” After all, math, science, and language arts are all real disciplines. However, they are not tangibly real, nor is anything “at stake,” like in a war. Bullets, bombs, and dead bodies are all tangibly real things that soldiers deal with daily. They are also a departure from the perceived abstract quality of math and language arts. Tim also suffers displacement as a result of what he perceives as “real.” In “The Lives of the Dead,” when told to shake hands with the corpse, he refuses, and Dave Jensen suggests that “[m]aybe it’s too real for [him]” (226). Tim replies that it is “[w]ay too real” (226). At that moment, Tim is unaccustomed to the harsh realities of war, and the initial shock of seeing the corpse forces this into harsh focus. Tim’s example and Bowker’s example actually reflect opposite ends of the spectrum. On one end Tim undergoes his first exposure to this kind of traumatic event. He responds by attempting to suppress the reality of the situation because it scares him. Bowker,

who has undergone so many traumatic events that he is accustomed to the trauma, is on the other end of the spectrum. Bowker is so affected by these traumatic experiences that he is now drawn to the harsh reality of war and thus dissatisfied with the lack of tangible reality he finds in American society. Both characters find themselves displaced because their normative thresholds for “reality” do not jibe with their respective situations.

Additionally, O’Brien designs entire stories around the questionable reality of the narrative. These include “The Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” and “How to Tell a True War Story” from *Things* and episodes in *July, July*, such as Johnny Ever’s incessant broadcast to David Todd. “The Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” is told by the narrator Tim, who credits the story to Rat Kiley, who, as if he were not unreliable enough as a narrator, credits small parts of the story to other soldiers. The issue of what really happens, or if any of it happens, is a principal concern. Likewise, “How to Tell a True War Story,” told by the narrator Tim, has a section that Tim credits to Mitchell Sanders about “[a] six-man patrol [that] goes up into the mountains on a basic listening-post operation” and starts hearing music and voices that seem to come from nowhere and creep them out (72). After several days they hear “[non] human voices,” “[t]hey lose it,” and “get on the radio and report enemy movement—a whole army, they say—and they order up the firepower ... arty and gunships ... air strikes” (74-5). They waste an exorbitant amount of munitions, and, when asked what they saw or heard, “they don’t say diddly” (75). Sanders later admits that he made up parts after asserting over and over that “it happened. Because every word is absolutely dead-on true” during the initial telling of the story (74). However, after confessing the made-up parts, he asserts again that “‘it’s still true ... you just plain won’t believe’” (77). O’Brien’s opposing use of truth and fiction throughout his writing will be discussed in the next chapter. However, this example shows how much is built

on the questionable reality of a situation or story, much like “The Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong,” as there is a claim that the story is based in fact but defies what one could logically see as “real.” Similarly, Johnny Ever’s character comes from the transistor radio broadcasting the *Apollo 11* moon trip, which, from all indications, really is present during David Todd’s wounding. However, it is unlikely that Johnny Ever speaks directly to David Todd during that broadcast and even less likely that he continues to speak to him throughout the rest of his life. Johnny Ever is a real person in the story, but not the way he appears. His existence illustrates David’s displacement in a couple of ways, not the least of which is David’s understanding of reality.

#### IX. Moving forward with Displacement

Displacement should mean something different and more complex than at the beginning of this chapter, but it should still be clear. It is an estrangement from others, from society, from one’s perception of him or herself, and from reality. “O’Brien’s concept of displacement is” not, as Tina Chen suggests, “predicated upon the impossibility of any permanent return ... insist[ing]” instead “upon multiple returns,” nor is O’Brien “a displaced writer” with “no ‘native place’ to which to return” (81, 83). O’Brien establishes displacement the same way it functions within his stories, through faults in characters’ relationships, heavily involving the understanding of one another and the world around them. Chen comes close to this when she suggests that “O’Brien’s displaced consciousness is oriented toward Vietnam and the brotherhood that it begins to represent” (94). Her statement would be more correct if she had said it is that “brotherhood,” which is established in and represented by Vietnam, towards which *Tim* gravitates and focuses. After all, it is the relationships inherent in the idea of “home” or

“Vietnam” that really matter, not the locations of “home” or “Vietnam” themselves. And, although based in people’s relationships to one another, O’Brien’s displacement is also not synonymous with “isolation” or “loneliness,” nor is it a disorder, even though the *DSM-IV* essentially lists it as a symptom of PTSD. Rather it is the achievement of a simply different or alternate point of view by the displaced person(s). The recognition of alternate points of view often has the residual effect of bringing displaced characters together, away from society and in a manner that society does not understand or recognize. It is in this way that O’Brien “redeem[s] the experience of displacement” through an intensive cataloguing or indexing of the plethora of ways that displacement shapes who people are and how they see and interact with the world (Chen 95).

O’Brien suggests that perhaps these differences not be recognized as symptoms of disorder, but rather as reactions against society’s close-minded, two-dimensional point of view. The societal expectation for a returning veteran is “the reaction ... of Robinson Crusoe: you admit you’re shipwrecked, but then you compulsively try to make your new home just like the old one ... —so that you can forget that you ever were shipwrecked” (Ringnalda 95). In essence, you acknowledge that you had the experience, but ultimately you work to suppress it and attempt to make everything exactly as it was before the experience. O’Brien is suggesting that veterans exhibit many of these symptoms simply because their psyches are reacting against societal expectation. For instance, someone who is suffering intense flashbacks or hypersensitivity to “cues ... of the traumatic event” is not demonstrating an inability to effectively deal with that traumatic event. Rather, that individual is refusing to suppress (i.e., not react or respond to) “or simply ignore” the memory of the event and the new understanding of the world that it brings, as society demands (*DSM-IV* 428; Tal, “Speaking...” 246). Similarly, one’s “markedly diminished

interest or participation in significant activities” does not demonstrate that person’s inability to appropriately interact with something “significant” to his or her life (*DSM-IV* 428). Rather a diminished interest or participation indicates simply that the individual does not see the activity as “significant” or important. And this shift in values does not necessarily connote something problematic or negative, only something different. Society perceives such a shift as negative only because “the American character is,” among other things, “*not a Vietnam combat veteran,*” which makes it much easier to “marginal[ize]” a “traumatized community” (*emphasis mine* Tal, “Speaking...” 246).

On the other hand, someone demonstrating an “inability to recall an important aspect of the trauma” seems to reflect society’s demand that one suppresses his or her trauma. However, it is not that simple. One’s inability to recall something indicates an effort on his or her part to suppress the trauma in an effort to conform to societal norms. However, that person’s subconscious is unable to both be aware of the trauma and not react or respond to it at the same time. Therefore, since the person is making a concerted effort to suppress the trauma, he or she can forget the trauma on the conscious level in an effort to appear to conform to societal norms. O’Brien’s father likely displayed similar behavior when telling O’Brien war stories “which focused more on the humorous aspects of military life” rather than on the important events that happened (Herzog, *Tim O’Brien* 6). This suggests that O’Brien’s father suppressed many important events during his service in two major combat campaigns and chose to tell funny stories instead. He most likely does so in an effort to not upset societal expectations regarding trauma, specifically the suppression of the trauma from children and from it affecting day-to-day life. O’Brien’s implicit suggestion of a neutral approach to displacement may not seem that radical, but consider, for example, that when veterans return home from war they are *never*

described by society as “enlightened.” Instead, we usually say something more along the lines of, “He came back *messed up*.” The *DSM-IV* even states that the symptoms of PTSD “significant[ly] distress or [impair] social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning” (429). This is all because “trauma is a curiosity, or it is indicative of a *problem*” (Tal, “Speaking...” 246). The *DSM-IV* says nothing about society’s inability to understand a person’s behavioral changes, nor does it indicate that someone might simply hold a different point of view which caused a behavioral shift. In this way, I do agree with Chen’s statement that O’Brien “theorizes displacement as a polyvalent ... experience,” although her implied meaning and mine are notably different (82).

I also agree with Chen’s assertion that O’Brien deals with “the epistemology of displacement,” probably much more so that she does, and in a different way (81). Hence, my assertion that trauma and displacement are unquestionably linked in that trauma induces displacement. And, although trauma is the paint and the brush through which O’Brien composes his stories, it is not the point. The resulting displacement and its implications, including the validity of alternate points of view realized because of it, are. Displacement and its implications are, in fact, not only the point, but also the underlying theme that O’Brien’s stories are constructed around and designed to explore. This is not only evident in the content of O’Brien’s stories, but in the way he constructs and writes them.

In the next chapter, I will discuss how I believe Tim O’Brien’s writing performs and enacts this theme of trauma-induced displacement through both form and style, thus demonstrating it for the reader on multiple levels. Tina Chen “use[s] ‘exile’ to denote the state of alienation characterizing O’Brien’s narrative voice in *The Things They Carried*” (82). I will, in essence use “displacement” to characterize O’Brien’s narrative voice in all of his writing, as

seen through a study of *The Things They Carried* and *July, July*. From there, I will take the theme and the manner in which the author performs and enacts it, and I will show how a reading of this kind yields a very important understanding of O'Brien's very negative portrayal of women in his various works.

### Chapter 3: Performing and Enacting Trauma-Induced Displacement

*“O’Brien often depicts war as inaccessible to nonveterans, creating a storytelling loop between characters within stories that excludes the uninitiated reader and privileges the authority of the soldier’s experience.”*

— Lorrie N. Smith, “*The Things Men Do,*” p. 18

Tim O’Brien’s writing performs and enacts this theme of trauma-induced displacement through elements of narrative form and narrative style, which, it should be noted, are difficult—if not impossible—to completely delineate from one another. These are difficult to completely delineate in O’Brien’s writing because the authorial and narratorial elements work together and often appear to be the other. In essence, what is actually an authorial element sometimes appears to be narratorial and visa-versa. O’Brien accomplishes this confusing overlap largely by putting so much of himself into his fiction, even narrating from the first-person point of view of a character named “Tim O’Brien.” As in the previous chapter, I will continue to distinguish between “Tim” the narrator and either “Tim O’Brien,” or just “O’Brien,” the author. This will help to clarify the manner in which the form and style of O’Brien’s writing in *The Things They Carried* and *July, July* perform and enact the underlying theme of trauma-induced displacement. When consulting both O’Brien’s works and the commentary regarding his works, we see that readers and scholars continually address and wrestle with several aspects of O’Brien’s writing. These aspects are the deviation from established genre forms, the purposely vague distinction between fiction and non-fiction (to which O’Brien himself contributes even outside of his written texts), the stylistic hallmarks of O’Brien’s writing, and the metafictional overtones in his writing. All of these habitually create complex issues and questions for readers, scholars, and non-scholars alike. My contention is that rather than being points of confusion for readers, these

aspects can be read as strategically designed and employed maneuvers for the explicit purpose of performing and enacting trauma-induced displacement.

### I. Forming a Genre for Displacement

The first aspect of O'Brien's writing is the authorial construction of his works in relation to the conventional forms of traditional genres in published writing. O'Brien's works do not always strictly conform to these conventional forms. For instance, he has written, according to some, six novels, and, according to others, eight novels. *Northern Lights* (1975), *Going After Cacciato* (1978), *The Nuclear Age* (1985), *In the Lake of the Woods* (1994), *Tomcat in Love* (1998), and *July, July* (2002) are almost universally regarded as novels. However, both *If I Die in a Combat Zone* (1973) and *The Things They Carried* (1990) are classified by different people as different genres. For the most part, O'Brien's first book, *If I Die*, is considered a war memoir. In fact, *If I Die* is both touted by the author and regarded by many critics as a nonfictional account of the war. Tobey Herzog, in his book *Tim O'Brien*, actually calls *If I Die* "[O'Brien's] war autobiography," and in *Vietnam War Stories: Innocence Lost* he refers to it as simply "fact" (4, 144). This is important to note because *Things* and *If I Die* share structural similarities, both possessing the novel characteristic of telling stories about a consistent cast of characters. However, neither work has a unified plot running throughout. This may not totally disrupt the memoir classification of *If I Die*, but it does make calling *Things* a "novel" tricky. This is why some call *Things* a novel and some, like Lorrie Smith, a "book of interlock[ing] stories" (16). O'Brien's writing overall supports both classifications, and he himself even calls it "half novel, half group of stories" ("An Interview with Tim O'Brien" 7). Steven Kaplan notes in *Understanding Tim O'Brien* that "O'Brien approaches writing novels as if he were working on a

collection of short stories” and “tries to make all of his chapters into independent stories, which have their own beginning, middle, and end” as well as “a sense of completeness because he wants them to possess what he calls ‘internal integrity’” (12). Even though Kaplan is commenting before either *Tomcat in Love* or *July, July* are published, he bases his conclusion on a close study of all of O’Brien’s writings to that point as well as several interviews. He relies on consistent and fundamental elements in O’Brien’s writing to base his claims. In fact, seven of O’Brien’s eight books include sections or chapters published as independently as short stories prior to the publication of each respective book. Additionally, some of these chapters are highly anthologized as stand-alone short stories, like *July, July*’s “Half Gone” and *Going After Cacciato*’s “Night March,” which in 2000 “[was] O’Brien’s most widely anthologized story” (Timmerman 101). In fact, a bibliography on O’Brien’s website shows almost a dozen short stories published prior to *July, July* that end up in the finished novel (Zilleruelo).

*July, July*, is in fact a series of stories about several people that O’Brien intermittently ties together with a thirty-year class reunion (roughly) every other chapter. Overall, the book tells the collected stories of the characters, not the story of their reunion. The reunion and its events serve as the unifying element, but does not alone represent any central conflict or resolution. The reunion works almost like a framing element for the other stories as the non-reunion chapters contain the real substance of the book (*July, July* begins and ends with “Class of ‘69” reunion chapters and, save one place, reunion chapters alternate with non-reunion chapters—which I consider and hereafter call “non-reunion stories”—throughout the book). The non-reunion stories are, in essence, the sections that explore the various trauma-induced displacements of the different characters. O’Brien’s use of story-like chapters framed by a unifying event allows not only for these chapters to stand alone as short stories but also

contributes to a more contemporary form of writing. It is contemporary in that O'Brien does not construct a narrative around any single vector, but rather several narratives, each representing its own vector that collectively catalogue or index their respective points. I would argue that the points the vectors represent are the various ways trauma-induced displacement comes about and/or works within the characters' lives. In using multiple vectors, O'Brien refuses to give the reader the nicely packaged and complete feeling of closure a novel traditionally provides. In a press release by his publisher, O'Brien calls the reunion chapters "[t]he spine of the novel—the main action" ("Press Release for *July, July*"). I agree with his calling it the "spine," as everything else branches off of that central premise; however, I believe calling it "the main action" is misleading. O'Brien's comment that "every once in a while the novel jumps into the past, into one of the character's lives" is also misleading because the phrase "every once in a while" implies that those shifts to the past are only occasional and certainly not prevalent. When reading the book, the shifting actually feels the other way around, as much more time is devoted to those non-reunion stories (told in the past) than the reunion chapters (told in the present tense) ("Press Release..."). O'Brien himself affirms that *July, July* is "a character-driven book," and says that "[f]or each character [he] ... choose[s] a pivotal, fork-in-the-road, edge-of-the-cliff moment" ("Press Release..."). These eleven non-reunion stories are those "pivotal ... moment[s]." They not only form the bulk of the book, but also the bulk of the action in the book. The reunion does tie all these stories—the main action—together and contextualize everything, but ultimately it is the "pivotal" moments that drive the characters, and therefore the book. So, essentially, the novel *July, July* works almost exactly as *Things* works. A common cast of characters help unite both works. The difference is that the commonality of Vietnam as a setting serves to tie *Things* together whereas the alternating "Class of '69" chapters serves to tie

*July, July* together. In both cases, O'Brien's use of a collection of related stories representing separate vectors enacts displacement on readers by not allowing them to focus on the central plotline that is expected when reading a novel. The barrage of individual stories forces readers to interpret the stories individually and simultaneously as a group while readers try to decide whether the stories should be interpreted individually or as a group. The resulting confusion displaces readers from the text thereby demonstrating the theme firsthand.

## II.i. Forming Fiction or Nonfiction

*"All stories are meant to put a reader into the shoes of a storyteller or at least into the shoes of, if not the storyteller, then the characters in the story ... That's why you tell the story, because of something that happened that you need others to identify with."*

—Tim O'Brien, "Responsibly Inventing History," p. 10

Another common issue regarding Tim O'Brien's writing is the fictional or nonfictional quality of his works. Referring to *If I Die* and *Going After Cacciato*, Eric James Schroeder points out that "Tim O'Brien was the first combat veteran to produce both nonfictional and fictional works which deal with the war" (116). Schroeder also notes that in an interview he conducts that O'Brien refers to writing *If I Die* as a "process of *making* a book" by "'stitching'" together "'vignettes'" (117). This word choice sharply contrasts his description of his work on other books as 'writing,' and suggests a "lexical significance," most likely relatable to the fictional aspect of the work (Schroeder 117). In other words, O'Brien claims to have simply constructed *If I Die* from sketches of events but to have written his other books. The distinction suggests that *If I Die* is nonfiction and that everything else at the very least has fictional elements. Schroeder also notes that *If I Die*, although told uniformly in the past tense, has narrative sections intermixed with reflective sections (118). This is the same technique O'Brien

employs in *Things*. Don Ringnalda refers to these sections, “O’Brien’s practice of juxtaposing what we perceive as story and essay,” as “[a]nother device designed to blow fuses and stub toes ... [it] is jarring in itself” (107). These reflective shifts create the illusion that the reader is getting an inside look when really everything is part of the story. The reflective sections appear to clarify the stories surrounding them. However, at least as far as *Things* goes, those reflective sections are just as fictive as everything else. Steve Kaplan firmly asserts that *Things* “destroys the line dividing fact from fiction” in a number of ways (171). O’Brien calls it “a form” in the story “Good Form,” although it often feels more like a mind game (*Things* 179). In this story, Tim distinguishes between “story-truth” and “happening-truth,” story-truth being what feels true and happening truth being what actually happened (177). In *Things*, Tim continually mirrors this by telling the reader that something is “true” but that it “never happened” (84). O’Brien pulls this off by asserting that “a true war story does not depend on that kind of truth. Absolute occurrence is irrelevant” and “[i]n any war story, but especially a true one, it’s difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen” which “becomes its own happening” (*Things* 83, 71).<sup>1</sup> In the end, events within the stories themselves are often left in question. As a result, readers are unable to fully connect with the text and thus remain displaced from a full understanding.

Readers cannot definitely label anything Tim tells them about as having actually happened because in “How to Tell a True War Story” and “Good Form” O’Brien sets the whole book up as being simultaneously “true” and “made up” (14, 179). He even says “it’s safe to say that in a true war story nothing is ever absolutely true” and claims that there are “true stor[ies] that never happened” (82, 84). Even careful, close readers cannot really tell what is up or down.

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<sup>1</sup> O’Brien complicates this in *Things* by retelling a handful of events over and over again in different stories with important details—sometimes even the point of view—changing from one version to the next. I will discuss this later, but I point it out now to emphasize how all the elements of his form and style work together.

In hindsight we realize that O'Brien clues us in to his "form" before the first story even begins. The epigraph to *Things*, an excerpt from *John Ransom's Andersonville Diary* reads,

This book is essentially different from any other that has been published concerning the "late war" or any of its incidents. Those who have had any such experience as the author will see its truthfulness at once, and to all other readers it is commended as a statement of actual things by one who experienced them to the fullest. (no page number)

The writer's distinction between "truthfulness" and "a statement of actual things" seems to be essentially similar to O'Brien's distinction between story-truth and happening-truth. However, even with this, the reader is still left wondering what is real and what is not. And, O'Brien's continuous tampering with the true or untrue qualities of *Things* indicates that he has some kind of agenda as he could simply write many of these stories without the incessant ambiguity of truth and still achieve both "truthfulness" to "[t]hose who have had any such experience" and "a statement of actual things" to those who have not.

Furthering the complication is the fact that *Things*, which O'Brien explicitly identifies as "a work of fiction" on the *Things* title page, continues the stories of the characters in *If I Die*, which O'Brien claims is non-fiction. O'Brien also explicitly tells Martin Naparsteck that *Things* is "part nonfiction, too" ("An Interview with Tim O'Brien" 7). This obviously creates an intense conflict between the supposed fictional or nonfictional quality of both works since they address not only the same characters and general issues, but also some of the same episodes and occurrences; for example, the baby water buffalo killing (which also appears in *Going After Cacciato*). This all works because O'Brien's experience in Vietnam upholds the possibility of there being truth behind all of his stories. He sets everything in *Things* up as fiction but presents

it in such a way (usually through the reflective episodes) that readers want to read it as nonfiction. O'Brien uses this conflict to play with readers, bouncing them back and forth between fiction and nonfiction from the first page until the last page. In the end, readers probably want to believe at least some of it, but know that they cannot.

In fact, it is hard to read *The Things They Carried* and not see it as autobiographical because, as Kalí Tal states, “[t]o posit a literature of trauma one must assume that the identity of the author as author is inseparable from the identity of author as trauma survivor” (“Speaking...” 217). This statement fits *Things* and its common identification as at least somewhat “autobiographical” very well. After all, Tim O'Brien's narrator in *Things* (and *If I Die*) is named “Tim O'Brien.” They are both from the Midwest and attended small colleges in that region. Both have plans to attend graduate school when they are drafted into the army after college (although in different fields of study). Both the author and the narrator have previously published books entitled *If I Die in a Combat Zone* (memoir) and *Going After Cacciato* (novel). What is more, this character narrates the whole book, and there is never an overt indication that the narrator is actually a character distinguishable from the author. Probably the best indicator is that O'Brien has no daughter like the one Tim mentions in “Field Trip” and “Good Form.” Of course, the average reader would not know enough about O'Brien to see the inconsistencies between O'Brien's actual life and his narrator's life. Most scholars acknowledge some link between O'Brien's experience and his protagonists' experiences, but they all acknowledge the presence of fictional elements and in his writing as well. No one of note claims that O'Brien's work is all true, and no one of note claims that it is entirely fictional. Some scholars, like Herzog and Silbergleid, will use variations of the word “autobiography” to refer to his work (Herzog, *Tim O'Brien* 115; Silbergleid 129). Some, like Catherine Calloway, refuse to commit

themselves to such a weighted label and simply say that the issue is “ambiguous” (250). The key is that everyone positions themselves at varying degrees between the two extremes and mutually agree that neither extreme is accurate. Many even argue that the distinction between fiction and (fictionalized) autobiography simply does not matter. O’Brien himself would almost certainly agree. He often hints at this. For example, in the “Keynote Address” of Mark Heberle’s book O’Brien says, “[t]he understandable inclination to evaluate art by political, sociological, historical, or other such ‘realistic’ standards, can be *especially unproductive and even misleading*” (*emphasis mine* 7). O’Brien is sometimes more direct about this subject. For instance, in an early interview with Eric James Schroeder, O’Brien outright asserts that,

You’ve done this yourself. Everybody does it. You start telling someone a true-life story and at some point you find yourself embellishing it just a bit—instead of there being four guys coming at you with crowbars, suddenly there’re twelve of [them] ... And so you rev up detail, heighten it, so as to create an emotion in the listener equivalent to the emotion you felt, this great fear. (“Tim O’Brien: ‘Maybe So’” 131)

The goal is not to present the facts; rather, the goal is to represent the true feelings. Therefore, the facts are subject to change as long as the goal is to elicit a certain feeling, and what the reader should really be paying attention to is the feelings, the emotions that those “facts” or “non-facts” elicit. As Don Rindgnalda, in *Fighting and Writing the Vietnam War*, aptly notes, O’Brien’s writing “present[s] the cool truth” by “heat[ing] it up” (113). In essence, O’Brien makes the events of his stories relatable and intensely emotion-provoking by saying they are ‘true,’ but does not allow them to become “cool” or cold in that they are devoid of feeling by becoming ‘facts’ (113). It is precisely this issue that makes *Things* work. Although

Robin Silbergleid calls *Things* “[a]utobiographical [m]etafiction,” she points out that “O’Brien incorporates undeniably autobiographical elements” which “[call] attention to [*Things*]’ apparent basis in reality. Arguably,” she claims, “it is precisely this liminal space—between fiction and nonfiction—that allows the text to do its critical work” (*emphasis mine* 129-30). Silbergleid claims that O’Brien uses *Things*’ autobiographical stance as a “rhetorical strategy” to establish narratorial credibility (137). This is necessary because, as Kalí Tal points out, “literature written about the trauma of others is qualitatively different from literature by trauma survivors” (“Speaking...” 217). Even those who do not agree that there “*is*” a “[qualitative] differen[ce]” can recognize the presence of a perceived difference on the part of the reader as society tends to believe first-hand accounts over third party retellings. This is important because, as Christopher Donovan points out, “[t]his aspect of ..., the man within the group, [is] ... central to [O’Brien’s] later novels like [*Things*]” (103). That is what the epigraph and the almost-identical-yet-not-the-same narrator do for *Things*: allow for the stories to be read as real without making them historical or ‘cold.’ This results in readers attaining what they recognize as a cursory understanding of the feeling associated with the story and its characters without a full understanding of those feelings or pertinently ‘factual’ knowledge. Thus O’Brien invites readers in only so far as to make them starkly aware that they are outsiders.

Personable stories have an ability to affect a reader emotionally in ways historical facts do not. Rindgnalda is right that “[f]eelings create facts, not the other way around” (113). Silbergleid is right that the issue of whether or not *Things* is autobiography is a device conceived to get readers to trust what the narrator has told them on the basis of credibility established through suggested autobiographical elements. But, as I said earlier, O’Brien does not need to toy

and play with the reader as he does throughout *Things* in order to accomplish this, so there must be another reason. As Silbergleid puts it,

I am not interested in whether O'Brien tells the truth—an inexorably frustrating and unanswerable question—but rather why the narrator needs to declare the truthfulness of events or details in order for the book to do its work as a narrative account of Vietnam. (130)

That reason is O'Brien's performance and enactment of displacement. This is one of the ways he effectively displaces the reader through his text. He makes readers somewhat understand without really knowing what actually happens or what they actually *know*. This construction simultaneously brings readers into the story while intentionally throwing up a barrier to keep them out.

## II.ii. O'Brien himself as a Text

O'Brien's *incessantly* contradictory nature highlights this construction of barriers to strategically and consciously displace readers. Scholars constantly interview O'Brien and bring up the fiction-or-nonfiction aspect of his writing. O'Brien constantly tells interviewers both "yes" and "no" to the same questions so much that his comments border on a kind of taunting or teasing. Tim O'Brien tells Naparstek that "the Tim character" in *Things* "is made up *entirely*" (*emphasis mine* "An Interview..." 7). While most scholars acknowledge the fictional overtones of the Tim character, I do not believe anyone honestly believes that he is "entirely" a fictional creation, nor do I believe that O'Brien honestly expects people to believe that he created Tim out of nothing. This example, which could be termed as exaggeration, is rather minor compared to some of O'Brien's more problematic commentary. O'Brien actually goes to the extreme of

directly contradicting himself from one answer to another *in the same interview*. For example, he claims that “‘Speaking of Courage’ ... came from a letter [he] received from a guy named Norman Bowker, *a real guy*, who [later] committed suicide” (*emphasis mine* “An Interview...” 7). In response to the very next question, O’Brien explicitly states that “everything is made up, including the commentary. The story about Norman Bowker is made up. *There was no Norman Bowker*” (*emphasis mine* “An Interview...” 8). One could attempt to argue that he means there was no actual guy named Norman Bowker or simply that the story is not real. The problem is that he explicitly says the character is based on a person with the same name who also kills himself after sending Tim O’Brien a letter, just like the character in “Speaking of Courage” and “Notes.” He then explicitly denies that *any* of it is based in reality when he asserts “everything is made up.” Similar contradictions in discussion about the fictional vs. nonfictional element of O’Brien’s writing are commonplace in his interviews. And, considering how O’Brien makes incredibly careful and intentional word choices in his writing, there is no conceivable way this contradiction is unintentional on his part as an interviewee. Among other things, I believe this is symptomatic of O’Brien consciously trying to shroud part of his life—namely that of the relationship between his life and his writing—in mystery. Kaplan cites O’Brien’s admission that “[t]here are certain events [he’s] never talked or written about” (qtd. 4). He simply does not want his readers to know, and he devotes a lot of energy to make sure they do *not* know.

A good real-life example of this comes from my undergraduate freshman composition teacher at the Virginia Military Institute, who taught *Things* as the text for her second semester class. In the Spring of 2003, Mrs. Susan B. Coleman-Croushorn, who had taught *Things* in her composition class for many years recalled a few years prior when Tim O’Brien had visited for a few days to speak and read to the cadets. Two of Mrs. Coleman-Croushorn’s students at the time

decided they were going to get to the truth behind whether or not O'Brien killed the man Tim talks about in "The Man I Killed," "Ambush," and "Good Form." They were naïve, cocky, and determined that they would get the "true"—here meaning: "explicitly factual"—answer. Mrs. Coleman-Croushorn specifically warned them that O'Brien would not tell them, but they proceeded anyway, full of confidence. They stayed close to O'Brien during his visit and attended every event he was at or participated in. "They went to a poetry reading and tried to get their answer during the Q&A session; they went to a book signing and attempted to approach him more one-on-one. They even figured out some way to gain entry to a reception that was held for him" (Coleman-Croushorn). Of course, O'Brien did not divulge the answer to the question—in fact, he did not offer an answer at all. "All he would tell them was that if they had read his book, they knew the answer" (Coleman-Croushorn). He left, and the students returned to class the next day extremely frustrated and disgruntled with O'Brien and his book. They did not realize that by pursuing the answer so obsessively, they demonstrated that they did not understand the point of what they had read: that "[his] presence was guilt enough" (*Things* 179). Those two cadets embody "the essential issue for the writer of the true war story," which is the question, "[h]ow does one tell the truth about war when no one wants to listen?" (Timmerman 107). I would like to add another realization that those two cadets did not make. They did not realize that *Things* is strategically constructed to elicit essentially that same feeling they were struggling with—that sense of knowing that they did not know the whole story and were therefore displaced from the author/narrator (they most likely would not distinguish between the two) and the text as a result.

O'Brien asserts that "it's not a game. It's a form," but either way he plays with this "form" on multiple levels, some beyond his fictional works (*Things* 179). For example, I have

an immensely hard time believing O'Brien's claims from the "Keynote Address" to Mark Heberle's new book *Thirty Years After* that, "Alas, I'm barely competent to discuss my own books," "I know next to nothing about literary analysis, and ... I do everything within reason to keep it that way" ("Keynote Address" 3). This claim is almost impossible to fathom considering that while studying political science in college, "O'Brien took many courses in philosophy and some in English" as well (Herzog, *Tim O'Brien* 10). Success in all three subject areas requires critical thought and intensive analytical skill. Herzog, who bases his work on several interviews with O'Brien, asserts that "he studied hard, learned a great deal, and received outstanding grades" (*Tim O'Brien* 10). Clearly O'Brien's claim that he lacks literary and critical skills appears ridiculous, as his collegiate success demonstrates the presence of such skills.

Additionally, Herzog and Kaplan clearly state that O'Brien's early life was filled with books. Herzog identifies O'Brien's father as "[a]n avid reader" on the library board who constantly brought "stacks of books" home for O'Brien (*Tim O'Brien* 6). Kaplan also notes this and even describes O'Brien growing up in a house that "always" had "books strewn all over" (2). O'Brien's "family ... spent a great deal of time discussing books and analyzing passages together, ... talk[ing] about how scenes and events in a novel related to their own lives" (Kaplan 2). This basic biographical information completely and directly contradicts O'Brien's claim that he knows nothing about literary analysis. Furthermore, O'Brien claiming he knows nothing about literary analysis is comparable to him growing up at Wrigley's Field but claiming to have never learned to throw a baseball. Although certainly possible, such a scenario is laughably unlikely. I believe his biographical information over his claim, even though much of the biographical information comes from interviews with O'Brien, for three reasons. First, O'Brien has no perceivable reason to lie about it, and, by all appearances, has not as it is the only truly

consistent information given in interviews and commentary. Second, it is mostly information that could be proven false if someone were to take the time to do the fieldwork and find out. Third, everything O'Brien offers a questionable answer or statement to is inherently questionable and generally impossible to prove as correct or incorrect (even my assertion here that his quoted statement in the "Keynote Address" is false cannot be conclusively proved—I can only suggest the extreme unlikelihood of such a statement's validity). Furthermore, in every interview O'Brien gives, he demonstrates complete authorial awareness of his works and the plethora of conscious choices he makes in his writing process. At times, he even speaks about sentence level choices aimed at "mak[ing] [a] sentence go to the right place ... giv[ing] it a unique quality that makes it jump the way [he] want[s] to make [his] sentences somehow seem alive" (O'Brien, "Responsibly Inventing..." 16). So, while I do not even begin to believe O'Brien's claim, I also do not think that O'Brien expects readers and scholars to believe such claims either. O'Brien's continuation of his earlier claim suggests both self-awareness and a purpose for contradictory and deceptive claims and comments:

I work entirely by trial and error. I don't outline. I don't plan. I am enrolled in no school of literary thought. I am not a modernist or a postmodernist or a magical realist or a magically unrealistic deconstructionist. With one exception, which I much regret, I have never consciously implanted a symbol or metaphor in my work ... Sad as it may be, I just blunder along, sentence by sentence, scene by scene, trusting that the characters and action will lead me to interesting places.

("Keynote Address 3-4)

The whole section of his "Keynote Address" seems very reminiscent of Mark Twain's "Notice," which appears prior to the first chapter of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, wherein "The

Author” implies the absence of “motive,” “moral,” and “plot” (2). Some would argue Twain does this in an effort to draw attention to the motive, moral, and plot. I tend to agree with the ‘some’ that would argue the purpose of Twain’s “Notice” as I have suggested here, and I wholly believe that O’Brien’s commentary on his own work—especially the cryptic and contradictory commentary—is in this same vein. O’Brien toys with scholars and readers this way in an effort to make his point(s). As displacement is so prominent in his works, both in theme and in the performed and enacted textual forms and styles, I believe this kind of commentary is aimed at furthering that theme’s impact on readers.

All of this yields two important points. First, I now have to justify my using some of O’Brien’s comments to support my argument while claiming others are misleading. There is not really a foolproof way to do this, but what I do is read O’Brien’s comments as scholars read his literature, as having one foot in reality and one in the fictional realm. I differentiate between the one and the other by comparing what O’Brien says with whether or not his texts (and/or life, when appropriate) truly support his statements. Second, I also reconcile these abundant discrepancies by recognizing them as part of his performance and enactment of displacement, just as I do in his writing. In essence, I am treating O’Brien’s various comments about his own writing as additional reflective episodes on his fiction, much like Tim’s reflecting in the *Things* stories “Love,” “Notes,” and “Good Form.” The only difference is that, whereas in *Things* I distinguish between the narrator and the author, I cannot do that with interviews and other commentary by O’Brien. After all, he is the author. I can only treat the commentary, or rather O’Brien himself, as another text. Regardless, I believe the purposeful confusion O’Brien inflicts on his readers supports my contention that he intentionally forms and styles his works to perform displacement and undeniably enacts the same theme on readers on an authorial level.

### III. Styling Displacement

“[I]n *The Things They Carried* Tim O’Brien incessantly remembers and revises his experiences in Vietnam, approaching these from various angles and foregrounding his imaginative reconstruction in an attempt to record as faithfully as possible the truth about Vietnam...”  
--Jim Neilson, *Warring Fictions*, p. 213

Tim O’Brien also enacts his theme through elements of style, which have many “brilliant evocations of [postmodern]” or contemporary traits (Neilson 216). Some of these elements, which have become hallmarks of O’Brien’s style, include the fragmentation of narratives, a heavy use of repetition and revision, unreliable narrators, and, as discussed earlier, the absence of a unified plotline. The plot element not only affects the classification of each book by challenging the conventions of the genre but also discombobulates readers by not allowing them to attach to, or get bearings on, a central plot structure. This discombobulation allows readers to get involved with the story but never allows them to ground themselves in it. Thus readers feel displaced because they know the story the narrator has told them, but cannot fixate on what the story is building towards or what it all means.

One of O’Brien’s most noticeable stylistic choices in his writing is his use of fragments. Fragments are very evident in most of his writing, even in some articles like “The Vietnam in Me,” but especially in books like *Things* and *July, July*. O’Brien likes to break up the events in his stories and give them to the reader one or two plot points at a time. By parceling out small bits of information, O’Brien gives readers enough to be interested in or to wonder about, but not enough to understand the full scope of what has happened. So, the reader keeps reading, hoping to find out. Of course, many of O’Brien’s stories add a twist to the fragmentation and do not satisfy the reader’s desire to know, instead telling the reader just enough for them to wonder

about the little bit they do not know. A prime example of this is in the *Things* story “Love.” In “Love,” which immediately follows “The Things They Carried,” Tim has a reflective episode in which he talks and reminisces with Jimmy Cross about the war roughly fifteen years later. O’Brien explicitly connects this story with “Things” through Tim’s narration that he and Cross talk about “all the things [they] still carr[y] through [their] lives” (27). Since many of the stories in *Things* do not directly connect, O’Brien uses this language to establish a connection between the two pieces. He also has Tim and Cross talk about Martha, Ted Lavender’s death, and several other things mentioned in “Things.” Tim even consults Cross about writing a story about the episode (presumably this story becomes “The Things They Carried”). Cross responds by asking Tim to “[m]ake [him] out to be a good guy, ... [b]rave and handsome, ... [b]est platoon leader ever” (30). He immediately follows this up by asking Tim to “do [him] [the] favor” of not “mention[ing] anything about—,” but is cut off by Tim’s promise that “[he] won’t” (30). This ending is designed to illustrate to the reader that there is more information that the text does not communicate. This knowledge leaves the reader hanging and wanting more at the story’s close. In many cases, readers push further into *Things* hoping to find the answer in a later fragmented episode but never do, as it is explicitly clear that “O’Brien labors to produce carefully crafted sentences often containing intentional ambiguity of content” throughout his works, not just in *Things* (Herzog, *Tim O’Brien* 23).

*July, July* is built around eleven characters, whose stories are fragmented throughout the book. The book then ends on a similar note to that of *Things*—the last chapter a montage of intermingled scenes, events, and images from the whole cast of past and present characters. By the end of the book, the reader has a feeling for who the characters are but does not know what will happen to anyone past the final page because everyone is still travelling, planning, or

talking—no one has arrived at his or her destination yet. Readers see the directions that O'Brien sends the characters off in but are left wondering what becomes of everyone. O'Brien's use of fragmented episodes and his added twist on readers' desires and expectations to be told the whole story displace readers as it introduces part of the story only to consciously exclude them so that they are aware that they do not know the whole story.

O'Brien's postmodern use of repetitions and revisions also displace readers. These repetitions and revisions are very obviously prominent in *Things*, especially when we look at the three stories dealing with Kiowa's death and the three stories dealing with the Vietnamese soldier killed in the ambush. "The Man I Killed," "Ambush," and "Good Form" all retell and/or revise Tim's killing (or not killing) of a Viet Cong soldier. "In the Field," "Speaking of Courage," and even "Field Trip" and "Notes" to an extent, all retell or revise how Kiowa dies in the shit field. "Speaking of Courage" tells of Kiowa's death in fragmented pieces as seen from Norman Bowker's point of view looking back after the war. It focuses on the moment during the nighttime mortar attack when Bowker fails to hold on to Kiowa as Kiowa was sliding away under the mud. "In the Field" is the story of what happens that morning after Kiowa dies in the mortar attack. It shifts between three distinct third person points of view as the platoon searches for Kiowa's body. The first is a non-specific third person point of view focused on Norman Bowker, Mitchell Sanders, and Azar. The other two points of view are close third person-limited and belong to Lieutenant Jimmy Cross and an unnamed soldier who appears only in this story. In both "Speaking of Courage" and "In the Field," the characters reflect back to that night and the events that surround Kiowa's death. But whereas "Speaking of Courage" focuses on the moments earlier in the day and the actual mortar attack, "In the Field" tells the reader what happens just moments before the mortars start coming in. The unnamed soldier remembers

turning on his flashlight to show Kiowa a picture of his girlfriend, a tactically stupid thing to do as it allows the Viet Cong to zero in the location and drop mortars on the platoon. He blames himself for “kill[ing] Kiowa” just as Lieutenant Cross blames himself for setting up camp on what he knows to be “indefensible ground ... [l]ow and flat. No natural cover” (176, 169). In “Field Trip” Tim returns many years later with his daughter to return Kiowa’s moccasins to the field where he died. The three stories revolve around the same event and retell overlapping portions of that event. What is really interesting is the way each retells the story. In “Speaking of Courage” and “Field Trip” Tim does not blame anyone for Kiowa’s death—it is simply something horrible that happens. In “In the Field” multiple characters blame themselves, namely Cross and the unnamed soldier. What is notable is that O’Brien rewrites almost identical passages and attributes them to different characters in different stories. The following passage is selected from “Speaking of Courage”:

The field was boiling ... Two rounds hit close by. Then a third, even closer, and immediately, of to his left, he heard somebody screaming. It was Kiowa—he knew that. The sound was ragged and clotted up, but even so he knew the voice. A strange gargling noise ... There were bubbles where Kiowa’s head should have been.

The left hand was curled open; the fingernails were filthy; the wristwatch gave off a green phosphorescent shine as it slipped beneath the thick waters.

He would’ve talked about this, and how he grabbed Kiowa by the boot and tried to pull him out. He pulled hard but Kiowa was gone, and then suddenly he felt himself going too ... He released Kiowa’s boot and watched it slide away. Slowly, working his way up, he hoisted himself out of the deep mud, and then he

lay still and tasted the shit in his mouth and closed his eyes and listened to the rain and explosions and bubbling sounds. (148-9)

This next passage is selected from in “In the Field”:

He remembered two mortar rounds hitting close by. Then a third, even closer, and just off to his left he’d heard somebody scream. The voice was ragged and clotted up, but he knew instantly that it was Kiowa ... Later, when he came up again, there were no more screams. There was an arm and a wristwatch and part of a boot. There were bubbles where Kiowa’s head should’ve been.

He remembered grabbing the boot. He remembered pulling hard, ... and how finally he had to whisper his friend’s name and let go and watch the boot slide away ... Later he’d found himself lying on a little rise, face-up, tasting the field in his mouth, listening to the rain and explosions and bubbling sounds.

(170-1)

The first quoted section is Norman Bowker’s account and the second is the account of the unnamed soldier (both relayed through Tim, the narrator). Both are 3<sup>rd</sup> person, and both, although told by the narrator, are very much ingrained in the consciousness of the character. This, along with most of O’Brien’s writing, heavily utilizes repetition. However, this example definitely constitutes a revision of this episode, as this episode is the genesis for all three of these stories. This revision is supported by the repeated use of the phrase “his friend Kiowa” in all three stories (altered to “my friend Kiowa” for the first person point of view in “Field Trip”) (153, 170, *emphasis mine* 184). Each time a different character is being referred to as Kiowa’s friend, indicating the three characters are rewrites of one another, as the language is so purposefully similar. When discussing O’Brien’s style in *Understanding Tim O’Brien*, Steven

Kaplan makes the point that O'Brien "works intensely ... trying to squeeze things down and make his prose as economical and condensed as possible," largely through rhythm and repetition, to the point that his prose often possesses a poetic quality (13). Kaplan even cites O'Brien's claim that he spends substantial time "to 'make sentences and combinations of sentences that sound right and then work toward the creation of a dramatic dream. Rhythm is a big part of that ... The language mustn't be monotonous or repetitive'" (12). O'Brien is, as Christopher Donovan calls him, a "precise, almost delicate craftsman" (97). These points indicate the importance of O'Brien's word choice, no matter how seemingly inconsequential, which makes the link established by the reusing of that phrase an important connection central to the implied meaning of the stories. Even if one considers this a relatively weak link by itself, I believe there is more in "Field Trip" to support it, as "Field Trip" also offers evidence of being a revision. This comes when Tim calls Kiowa "[his] best friend" and claims that the "field ... swallow[s] ... [Tim's] belief in [him]self as a man of some small dignity and courage" (184). First, he calls Kiowa not only his "friend," but his "*best* friend" (*emphasis mine*). This is similar to the unnamed soldier who ponders that he and Kiowa had "been *close* buddies, the *tightest*," thus suggesting that they are not just friends, but "*best*" friends (*emphasis mine* 170). Second, Tim says the field takes "[his] belief in [him]self as a man of some small dignity and courage" which links the reader's mind back to "Speaking of Courage," where O'Brien spends eighteen pages discussing courage and cowardice and how Bowker "could not bring himself to be uncommonly brave" by "[winning] the Silver Star" (141). The entire story is Bowker justifying his "common valor" by citing that "many brave men do not win medals for their bravery" in an effort to maintain his dignity even though he does not "[win] the Silver Star" (141). These repetitions and revisions to the same episode serve to displace readers by involving them on multiple levels but

never allowing them to have a final answer to the question of “who actually did what?” The “Man I Killed,” “Ambush,” and “Good Form” together elicit a similarly unanswerable question for readers. At the end of *Things*, readers do not know if Tim really kills the man because Tim bounces readers back and forth between yes and no, each time claiming that this version is true before immediately contradicting that statement and saying it is a lie. O’Brien’s rewriting of this episode so that he does and then does not kill the man discombobulates readers and leaves them with the impression from the stories, but without the knowledge of which version is real and which is a revision. Think of it not only as a re-vision in the re-writing sense of the word, but also as a re-seeing of an event from a different perspective. Each perspective, of course, yields a different understanding, and the amalgamation of these perspectives is what displaces readers by discombobulating them.

Although these are examples of revisions, they are also examples of the confusing flow of information inherent in every story in *Things*. Essentially, O’Brien’s intentional uncertainty of events within his stories is another level to the uncertain nature of the stories themselves in regards to their fictional vs. nonfictional alignment. The difference is that where fiction vs. nonfiction focuses on the question of what really happened in real life, this discussion will focus on the question of what actually happens within the stories. The confusion about what actually happens within the stories partially centers on the reliability of narrators and partially on the uncertainty of events due to some type of imaginative aspect or dream sequence quality that O’Brien often toys with. D.J.R. Bruckner points out that in *Things* the “[n]arrators dispute the accuracy of what they themselves are saying” (C15). “The facts about an event are given and then they are quickly qualified or called into question. Then a new set of facts about the same subject emerges, which are again quickly called into question—and on and on, seemingly

without end” (Kaplan 173). Tim, in fact, does this throughout the book, over and over. The ambiguity obviously questions the reliability of his narration, but it does not stop there. On top of Tim’s questionable reliability, O’Brien layers on other narrators of questionable reliability. For example, as I point out in the previous chapter, Mitchell Sanders tells about the patrol in the mountains and constantly affirms the truthfulness of his story, only to admit a moment later that he exaggerated or made up parts of it. Rat Kiley is a similar example, as he too “is an unreliable narrator,” even more so than either Mitchell Sanders or Tim himself (Kaplan 181). O’Brien sets the reader up for this, just as he did with Mitchell Sanders, by calling Rat’s reliability into question before the story even starts. But, whereas it is a subtle suggestion with Mitchell Sanders via Tim’s calling it “a good story” and Sander’s constant assurance that it is not just a story, it is an outright statement with Rat Kiley’s story, “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” (71). Tim plainly tells the reader that,

[a]mong the men in Alpha Company, Rat had a reputation for exaggeration and overstatement, compulsion to rev up facts, and for most of [them] it was normal procedure to discount sixty or seventy percent of anything he had to say. If Rat told you, for example, that he’d slept with four girls one night, you could figure it was about a girl and a half. It wasn’t a question of deceit... (89)

This passage shows the reader two very important things. First, since everything that comes after this passage in the story filters through Tim from Rat Kiley, the reader should automatically discount “sixty or seventy percent.” This discount of information makes Rat’s story simply a “story” in the fictional sense. Second, Tim’s discount of Rat also subtly reasserts Tim’s unreliability as a narrator when he offers his example of “figur[ing] it was about a girl and a half.” Tim does not offer this under any expectation that anyone is going to seriously consider

what “and a half” constitutes—for instance: Did Rat sleep with half of a girl, or did he half sleep with a girl? It is simply a joke. However, the presence of this joke amidst Tim’s testimony of what can and cannot be believed suggests that, although this is Rat’s story, it is filtering through Tim. Therefore Tim is as much a narrator of the story as Rat is. The end result of this narratorial filtering is that readers not only cannot distinguish fiction from nonfiction, they also wonder about what actually happens within the fictional story. So, even if readers simplify the situation and say that it is all fiction, or that it does not matter if it is fiction or not, they still have issues within each story defining exactly what happens and what is imagined to happen, or might happen. Such uncertainty displaces the reader in the exact same way the fragmented narrative style displaces the reader. What actually happens within the story is not clear and that unknowing wonderment consciously holds the reader back from fully identifying with or participating in the story.

Unreliable narration is not as apparent in *July, July*, which is told from various third person limited points of view. Because it is universally third person throughout the novel, that seemingly removes this aspect of questionable reliability of the narrator. However, each non-reunion story is told from a different third person perspective. Obviously none of the perspectives overtly portrays itself as coming from a character’s subconscious in the way a first person perspective would. However, each is deeply ingrained in a character’s perspective, and, although readers have someone outside the story telling what happens, they hear/see everything through the tinted lens of that character’s point of view. Basically, the narrator is reliably relaying information to readers; however, the information is not necessarily factual. Rather the information is as the character would perceive it. So, in “Half Gone,” even though the reader is hearing *about* Dorothy Stier, everything is as Dorothy sees/interprets it. Realistically, one can

argue the reliability of the narration in *July, July* either way, as reliable or unreliable. What is important is that every impression or image, at least in the non-reunion stories, is as perceived by the characters, not an independent narrator. Therefore every impression or image is tainted with the character's perspective, which makes it all suspect to interpretation regarding reliability. Essentially, the questionable nature of what actually happens in a story is still there (especially since the fragmented stories contribute as well). It is simply not as obvious and intertwined within the narrative itself as it is in *Things*. Whereas O'Brien screams it from the rooftops in *Things*, he simply suggests it in *July, July*. However, its presence in *July, July* is enough to demonstrate to the performance and enactment of displacement as a theme.

The last element of O'Brien's writing style that I want to talk about is not as prominent in either of the works I focus on here, but it is inextricably fundamental in other works. And, as it is noticeably present in *Things* and *July, July* to a degree, I will touch on it here. That element is the uncertainty of events due to some type of imaginative aspect or dream sequence. O'Brien refers to "imagination and memory" as "the two key ingredients that go into writing fiction" ("Tim O'Brien: 'Maybe So'" 135). Imagination and memory are notably present in "How to Tell a True War Story" with the patrol that goes into the mountains and begins to hear all the music and noise. Readers do not really know if the events of a story are imagined, actual occurrences within the story, or some degree in-between the two. This imaginative aspect is also prominent in another facet of that same story. In Martin Naparstek's interview, O'Brien acknowledges Naparstek's suggestion that the narrator of *Things* works through, and arrives at, his understanding of Curt Lemon's death through imagining and revising what happens over and over. Naparstek suggests that "[i]t's the exercising of his imagination that gets [Tim] at the truth," and O'Brien responds that "exercising the imagination is the main way of finding truth"

(“An Interview...”10). Naparstek’s comment and O’Brien’s agreement not only acknowledge the imaginative aspect but also suggest that a series of imaginative re-visions or re-seeings might help one arrive at “truth” in the sense of what actually happens. However, O’Brien continues his explanation saying that “[t]he experience that you remember is going to have a power to it that the total experience didn’t,” which indicates understanding the event not through actual occurrence but through one’s perception and memory of that occurrence (“An Interview...” 10). Herzog notes that O’Brien “is fascinated with the soldier’s powers of memory and imagination,” calling them “tricks of the mind” (*emphasis mine, Vietnam War Stories* 147). Thus, the reader still does not know exactly what transpires in the story because everything is or could be a “trick.”<sup>2</sup>

Master Sergeant Johnny Ever plays a similar role in *July, July*. Houghton Mifflin’s press release, “A Conversation with Tim O’Brien,” notes that Johnny Ever appears throughout *July, July* “as a crazed disk jockey, a blackjack dealer, a TV evangelist, a policeman, a next-door neighbor,” and even suggests that he is an “angel” (“Press Release...”). O’Brien resists calling Johnny Ever an angel, suggesting he might be “a devil or a voice of conscience or just a weird metaphysical middleman,” but states that “Johnny is meant to lift the story out of time” (“Press Release...”). At no point are readers really sure that Johnny Ever is an actual character in the sense that David Todd is a character. He certainly seems to start as a real character, as disk jockey, and transcend from there, but even that is uncertain. What is certain is the imaginative aspect or dream sequence quality to his inclusion in the story discombobulates readers

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<sup>2</sup> For example, in *Going After Cacciato*, the majority of the story is Paul Berlin’s day-dream, but the reader does not discover this until towards the end of the novel. Additionally, towards the end of *In the Lake of the Woods*, the reader looks back and realizes that somewhere along the way the narrator shifted from what *did* happen to what *might have* happened, thus bringing almost everything into question.

somewhat, which displaces them to some degree as they are not totally certain what has happened.

#### IV. It's All About the Metafiction

Much of the stylistic issues I address relate to the metafictional aspect of O'Brien's writing. Almost all O'Brien scholars within the past 20 years use the term "metafiction" at some point or another. Even if they do not use the term, they observe that "[*Things*] frequently becomes a story about writing a war story" (Herzog, *Vietnam War Stories* 151). This is not to say that majority opinion dictates what is fact and what is not, but the sheer magnitude of mass agreement on that issue speaks to the validity of that very claim. And, as a bonus, O'Brien himself affirms this at every turn in his writing and commentary. Bruckner says that "[the stories] in [*The Things They Carried*] are at least as much about storytelling as about men at war," and it seems no one disagrees (C15). Catherine Calloway asserts that "O'Brien ... call[s] the reader's attention to the process of invention and challeng[es] him to determine which, if any of the stories are true. As a result, the stories become epistemological tools, multidimensional windows through which the war, the world, and *the ways of telling a war story* can be viewed from many different angles" (*emphasis mine* 249-50). Calloway even says *Things* is "as much about the process of writing as it is the text of a literary work," and "the medium becomes the message" (qtd. in Herzog, *Tim O'Brien* 28; Calloway 251). Thus, just as Silbergleid points out that in *Things* O'Brien "uses appeals to autobiography as a rhetorical strategy" (Silbergleid 137), O'Brien is also using metafictional elements as a rhetorical device to not only draw attention to the nature of fiction in his work but also to incite readers to question everything that they have read on multiple levels.

O'Brien uses an adapted form of this strategy in *July, July*, although not as overtly. The entire book is based around the reunion but focuses on these non-reunion stories—all in the past—that are told through the deeply ingrained third person perspective. The reliability of the ingrained third person narrator deals some with the metafictional issue, as each story is essentially the character's version of his or her own story. Therefore there is the issue of having characters tell their own stories on some level, even if removed from the first person. Also, the way O'Brien structures the book can lend a metafictional interpretation. This interpretation comes from the alternating reunion chapter, non-reunion story, reunion chapter pattern throughout the novel.<sup>3</sup> At the end of each reunion chapter, there is a focus on or around one of the characters. The non-reunion story that immediately follows that reunion chapter is that character's back-story. For instance, Chapter 12 (reunion chapter) ends with Paulette Haslo and Ellie Abbott discussing the men who were in their lives at one time or another. It ends with Paulette turning the attention to Ellie by simply saying, "Your turn, Ellie" (161). Chapter 13, "Loon Point," is Ellie Abbott's story, after which the reader reenters the reunion in Chapter 14. This structure not only emphasizes the non-reunion stories as the focal point but also makes each non-reunion story a pseudo-response to the previous reunion chapter.<sup>4</sup> What makes this even more metafictional is the fact that many of the reunion chapters begin in response to the non-reunion story that immediately precedes it. This is the case with Chapter 14, where the first line is Paulette's response to Ellie's Chapter 13 story (which presumably has just been told to Paulette by Ellie), "'So what you're afraid of,' ... 'you're afraid of getting blackmailed?'" (181). This quote does not necessarily state, but certainly implies, that the story the reader has just

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<sup>3</sup> This is consistent, except, as noted earlier in chapter two, in the one instance where two non-reunion stories are back-to-back, Chapters 4 and 5. However, this structure is fitting as the two stories are about Amy Robinson and Jan Huebner, who are paired in the reunion stories as if they were a single entity.

<sup>4</sup> Not all of the examples are this overt in their transition into non-reunion stories, but several are which emphasizes this point even more.

finished reading in an imbedded third person has just been told by that character to one of the other characters at the reunion. Chapters depicting the non-reunion stories of other characters such as Ellie Abbott, Paulette Haslo, Marv Bertel, and Karen Burns' follow the same pattern.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, much of the time at the reunion that is not chronicled in the reunion chapters is merely time that characters spend telling and listening to each others' stories, which readers get from the ingrained 3<sup>rd</sup> person narrator. It is in this way that even *July, July*, which does not elicit any notable fiction vs. nonfiction debate, is also metafictional. And, although not as overtly as *Things*, the metafictional element of *July, July* serves to displace readers in the same manner.

## V. The Form and Style of Trauma

Staff Sergeant Cota: "*Are your friends alive?*"

Private Bozz: "*Yeah, Paxton's good. Johnson, he's good and he's good. If you're gonna make up a story, make up a happy one.*"

Staff Sergeant Cota: "*I ain't making anything up, son. And in Vietnam there are no happy fucking stories.*"

—*Tigerland*

Although my contention is to show trauma-induced displacement—emphasis obviously being on the displacement—as the central theme of O'Brien's writing, it is important to also quickly show that O'Brien's writing performs and enacts trauma as well. The performance and enactment of trauma is important because O'Brien's writing partners trauma and displacement up in cause and effect relationship. So, while displacement is ultimately the point, it does not exist without trauma of some kind. Mark Heberle very astutely outlines the basis for the argument that O'Brien's writing mimics trauma and its effects in his book *A Trauma Artist: Tim O'Brien and the Fiction of Vietnam*. In fact, not only does Heberle suggest that "[t]rauma is not

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<sup>5</sup> I should note that Karen Burns' story is bookended not with scenes of her interactions, but with scenes from before and after her memorial service as her character passes away before the reunion takes place.

so much the subject of O'Brien's works as it is the medium within which and out of which his protagonists are impelled to revisit and rewrite their life experiences," he also says of two of O'Brien's works that "trauma is both their fictional source and condition, mimicked by form and style and at the heart of their power as narratives" (*A Trauma Artist* xxi, 8). Although Heberle is writing of *In the Lake of the Woods* and *Tomcat in Love*, his statement extends beyond those two novels.

Heberle's claim that "several repeated motifs in the books are symptomatic of trauma survivors' behavior" is obviously correct (*A Trauma Artist* 7). After all, as Heberle points out, there are a number of suicidal and self destructive characters, including Norman Bowker, who begin to act out their "despair and grief" (*A Trauma Artist* 7). Had *July, July* been published before Heberle's work, he probably would have included David Todd, Jan Huebner, Amy Robinson, and Marv Bertel (to a lesser degree) to that list. The psychological conditions of these characters are pretty straightforward. However, he also says that not only does O'Brien's writing "center on trauma," but it also "formally replicate[s] its symptoms" (Heberle, *A Trauma Artist* xiv). In fact, "it mimics traumatization through style, organization of narrative, and point of view" (Heberle, *A Trauma Artist* 15). Each story within each book relives a character's traumatic experience, almost always from their point of view, even if filtered through a narrator. In some cases the character is telling the story, in others that telling is implied, in some it is imagined, and in others it is a reflection. What is important about this is that the *DSM-IV* outlines the effects of trauma including reliving, retelling, and intense remembrances of the traumatic event(s). So, the stories themselves become a symptom of their medium—trauma—as they "are organized as retrospective meditations or reflections by deeply traumatized figures trying to revisit the sources of their breakdowns so that they can recover themselves" (Heberle, *A*

*Trauma Artist* xxi). They are “cathartic re-creation[s] of the original scene or scenes of horror” or trauma from specific points of view (Heberle, *A Trauma Artist* 3). After all, everyone (society, the medical community, and trauma survivors alike) recognizes that “storytelling is a necessary outlet for traumatization” as “narratives are both products of trauma and vehicles of recovery” (Heberle, *A Trauma Artist* 188, 15).

Additionally, every story is heavily weighted with “characteristic devices of such enactments” like “repetition; fragmentation; violation of temporal sequence;” and others (Heberle, *A Trauma Artist* 15). Fragmentation and the violation of temporal sequence definitely constitute organizational issues within the narratives, and repetition is just one of the many stylistic elements that mimic trauma. For instance, the stories are cathartic, especially in the form O’Brien uses, as that is how “they replicate trauma therapy, which relies on an attempt to communicate to others an ineffable wounding” caused by the trauma (Heberle, *A Trauma Artist* xxi). The ineffability of the wounding makes it impossible to truly communicate it, and therefore stories are told over and over again with details changed in an effort to find the perfect approach or combination of details to convey what the narrator is trying to tell readers about what happened. And as the wounding is “ineffable” it cannot be communicated in a clear and direct manner. Instead O’Brien communicates trauma through all of the form and style choices that this chapter outlines.

This is also part of the story-truth vs. happening-truth distinction as the story-truth’s entire point is to convey the “sensation” so that the reader can “feel exactly what [the characters] fe[el]” (*Things* 89). Although the physical aspect often included in trauma is important, it is the psychological affect associated with that physical trauma that is the basis for any resulting side effects, including displacement. The psychological affects are possibly more important than the

physical aspect of trauma because “[t]raumatic events destroy the victim’s fundamental assumptions about the safety of the world, the positive value of the self, and the meaningful order of creation” (qtd. in Heberle, *A Trauma Artist* 13). Therefore it is not enough to communicate facts. Instead the details sometimes must be altered to allow the reader to participate and feel the trauma as it unfolds. Tim’s narration of “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” best exemplifies the importance of the psychological impact of trauma. Tim tells the reader that,

with this particular story, Rat never backed down. He claimed to have witnessed the incident with his own eyes, and I remember how upset he became one morning when Mitchell Sanders challenged him on its basic premise.

“It can’t happen,” Sanders said ... “It don’t ring true...”

Rat shook his head. “I *saw* it, man. I was right there. This guy did it ... Straight on. It’s a fact.” (90)

Rat makes the tragic error in trying to relay his story and the feelings associated with it by presenting it as fact, which is the exact opposite of how Tim sets up the story when he explicitly makes Rat an unreliable narrator. Mitchell Sanders is to Rat what the reader is to Tim. Mitchell Sanders challenges the possibility of the story’s factual basis instead of listening to and considering the story. So, learning from Rat’s mistake as he “read[s] the amusement in [Sanders’] eyes,” O’Brien does not assert the factual quality when he retells Rat’s story in “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” and thus mimics trauma therapy in his effort to not necessarily relay *what* happens, but rather *how it feels* because, according to Kalí Tal, “the communication of the traumatic experience” is “define[d] by the impossibility of its task” (“Speaking...” 218).

The constant repetition, not only of words and phrases within stories, but of the stories themselves also indicate “that the works have become an endless refiguration of trauma writing that constantly revises itself—or a symptom of trauma that is never healed” (xxiii). The baby water buffalo killing is a scene that appears first in *If I Die*, next in *Going After Cacciato*, then *The Nuclear Age*, and again in “How to Tell a True War Story” in *Things*. Even though Tim claims that “[n]one of it happened,” “especially that poor dumb baby buffalo,” his telling of the story represents O’Brien’s fourth telling of the incident (*Things* 85). O’Brien repeats the incident over and over again in four different books and this “suggests a personal working out of trauma through refabrication” (Heberle, *A Trauma Artist* 7). Much like Tim repeats Curt Lemon’s story again and again in “How to Tell a True War Story” and eventually arrives at an understanding of the events, O’Brien repeats this episode similarly. And, as this is O’Brien’s last rendition of the episode to date, it appears he may have reached his understanding in regards to whatever incident inspired the episode.

It is not just episodes that O’Brien continually rewrites, however. He also rewrites himself into characters over and over by “rewrit[ing] his own life through the lives of his protagonists (Heberle, “Speaking of Trauma” 65). This includes Thomas Chippering, the protagonist of *Tomcat in Love*, even though O’Brien asserts that Chippering is ““not too much like [O’Brien]”” (qtd. in Heberle, *A Trauma Artist* xxi). O’Brien’s “revision of himself as the protagonist” is as much a theme as anything else in his writing, but it is also an important clue to O’Brien’s relationship to trauma, as “identity itself is a construct, a fabrication that trauma survivors are forced to recognize and reassemble through narratives” (Heberle, *A Trauma Artist* 9, xxii). This act of revising one’s self as a protagonist is essentially what O’Brien does in all of his writing, which indicates that his writing is “a symptom of trauma that is never healed” and

“represents various attempts to recover from trauma” (Heberle, *A Trauma Artist* xxiii, “Speaking of Trauma” 77). Thus almost everything about O’Brien’s writing, from its form and style to its very existence and subject matter, are indications that the writing itself is a performance and enactment of his most recognized medium, trauma.

## VI. The Structure of Vietnam

Kaplan tells us that the “narrative structure” of *Things* “is determined by the nature of the Vietnam War and ultimately by life where ‘the only certainty is overwhelming ambiguity’ (88)” (176, qtd. from *Things* 82). According to Kaplan, “O’Brien’s method in [*Things*] of trying to convey the average soldier’s sense of uncertainty about what happened in Vietnam by presenting the ‘what-ifs’ and ‘maybes’ as if they were facts ... can be seen as a variation of” what “American soldiers [used] to convey their own uncertainty about what happened in Vietnam” (174). However true this is, O’Brien’s use of his form and style (including the aforementioned “‘what-ifs’ and ‘maybes’” presented as “facts”) serves the greater purpose of displacing the reader while simultaneously accomplishing several other authorial objectives, such as making the story real and something that readers can personally imagine and relate to by drumming up strong emotions. Everything is poetic in construction in the sense that every word choice, and every structural detail relate to the underlying theme. Tim O’Brien is a careful and methodical writer.

I should note that in this section I am “us[ing] ‘Vietnam’” as a reference to the war and “metaphorically as a psychic condition characterized by traumatization” and its resulting displacement (Heberle, *A Trauma Artist* xviii). In essence, this applies to O’Brien’s writing in general, not just his works with Vietnam settings and narratives. This overview of how

O'Brien's underlying theme of trauma-induced displacement is both performed for and enacted on the reader through O'Brien's form and style should outline explicitly how this theme applies to *Things* and *July, July*. However, it should also serve as a basic model for how his other writing also works towards the same theme in similar, if not the exact same, manners. Thus far I have established the existence of O'Brien's theme and demonstrated the manner in which he performs and enacts it. The next chapter will show why this method of reading is a valuable asset when we approach Tim O'Brien's writing.

## Chapter 4: O'Brien and Women

*We all have our ghosts.*

*Mine are Anna's letters from L.A.*

—Yusef Komunyakaa, “One More Loss to Count”

### I. Popular Theories Regarding O'Brien and Women

There are two very popular schools of thought regarding Tim O'Brien's treatment of women and female characters in his various works. The first is that O'Brien is simply a misogynistic sexist hell-bent on excluding and degrading women through his fiction. The second is that the female characters (as well as male characters with feminine features) are metaphorical representations of feminine qualities that men at war suppress and fight against for a number of reasons. Some scholars obviously venture out of these parameters; however, most fall somewhere under one of these two umbrellas. I will assert that the first is unproductive, and the second, while certainly offering valid points, does not strike at the heart of O'Brien's issue with women as represented by female characters.

Whereas “[f]ormalists ... [,] cultural critics, ... and postmodernists” praise a myriad of different aspects of Vietnam War narratives, “gender critics have read *against* these texts” (*emphasis mine* Neilson 217). Some scholars heavily criticize O'Brien, as well as other authors of Vietnam War narratives, for being misogynistic and sexist, “[complicit] in remasculinizing American culture,” through “objectifying, excluding, or silencing women” (Neilson 217; Herzog, *Tim O'Brien* 109). One such critic, Lorrie Smith, claims that *Things* “rewrite[s] the Vietnam War from a masculinist and strictly American perspective” that inherently “position[s] ... women and Vietnamese as others” by “repeatedly inscrib[ing] the outsider as female” because “women pointedly won't, don't, or can't understand war stories ... O'Brien writes women out of the war and the female reader out of the storytelling circle” (Smith 17, 18, 19). In short, O'Brien

designs his stories to execute an agenda that is subtextually sexist and misogynistic. The criticisms often seem to be responses to elements the critics find offensive and hinge on the fact that women, especially in the form of developed characters, are largely absent and denied their own voice. However, O'Brien does not exclude women on the basis of their being female, but rather on the basis of their being "uninitiated reader[s]" because the female sex is categorically defined as "nonveterans" in the same vein as any male who did not serve in combat (Smith 18). Therefore their exclusion is not designed or malicious. If anything, O'Brien's writing highlights women's absence from combat and reflects the response to their absence, as he claims this is one of the main points behind "How to Tell a True War Story" ("Responsibly Inventing..." 20).<sup>1</sup> Ultimately, the problems these critics have with O'Brien would be more accurately levied against his narrators and his characters, and claims that O'Brien's writing demonstrates a misogynistic agenda are distortions, especially when viewed in light of his more recent works like *July, July*.

The other common interpretation of O'Brien's treatment of female characters and women in general is well represented by Kalí Tal's assertion that, essentially, the female figures, who are generally in some type of conflict with the male characters, do not represent actual women so much as they are the metaphorical embodiment of feminine qualities. She writes that in *Going After Cacciato*, the relationship between the American male soldier and the Vietnamese female civilian is actually "an analogy for [the soldier's] relationship with himself—his own masculine and feminine parts" (Tal, "The Mind at War" 77). This is certainly legitimate as on multiple occasions Tim describes himself or his actions as seemingly feminine. He even spends the

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<sup>1</sup> Several stories address this issue (although some in more subtle ways). However, at the very least, "Sweatheart in the Song Tra Bong" also addresses this issue directly. O'Brien points out, over and over in his stories and commentary, that our culture and tradition mandate that "[h]alf our population is excluded from the horror of [having to] serv[e] in combat" because they are not subject to the draft ("Responsibly Inventing..." 20). However, this basic fact is often ignored or improperly considered when making such criticisms.

entirety of “The Man I Killed” describing the Vietnamese soldier, with whom Tim identifies, in feminine terms. Tim outright suggests that the Vietnamese soldier is “a scholar, maybe,” just like Tim, who at another point in the book lists all of his academic accolades, qualifications, and ambitions (*Things* 124). Lorrie Smith notes that “the narrator recognizes himself in the dead man” (23). Thus by describing the Vietnamese soldier in feminine terms, Tim is recognizing those qualities in himself.

In *Things*, the male characters are constantly at odds with the female figures in some form or another (with the possible exception of Linda, who is an innocent, and therefore treated much differently by O’Brien). This conflict exists because, as Tal asserts, “basic training or boot camp” teaches soldiers “to adopt a hypermasculine stance” in the face of combat, which “breaks down the barriers between known categories, throwing the soldier into a situation where he must revise his ideas of reality in order to survive” (“The Mind at War” 88). The result is the repression of emotions considered “feminine,” “including fear, confusion, a sense of being out of control, and an emotional attachment to [one’s] comrades” (Tal, “The Mind at War” 88-9). The repression occurs because it represents appropriate, objective means to realize “immediate needs for survival” (“The Mind at War” 89). This is a very astute and appropriate reading of O’Brien’s works in regard to female characters and women. After all, Lieutenant Cross burns Martha’s pictures and letters and tells himself that he will dispose of the pebble in a “determined” effort “to perform his duties firmly and without negligence” (*Things* 25). His newfound adherence to “strict field discipline” and acceptance of responsibility for Lavender’s death is all in an effort to “be a man about it” and “comport himself as an officer,” a patriarchal figure in the military (25). However, one important thing to note about this reading of O’Brien’s works is that, unlike Smith’s stance, it is explicitly applicable to war literature, or, at the very least, aspects of a work

that deal with war scenarios. It does not really apply to *July, July*. This presents a problem as O'Brien's stance that women are incapable of understanding and his generally negative and sometimes antagonistic treatment of women are consistent overall, thus suggesting there must be a more inclusive and complete answer.

## II. Trauma-induced Displacement vs. Popular Theories

Alex Vernon offers a different view than both of the above critical stances, suggesting that "O'Brien's work ... demonstrates a failure to find a satisfactory emotional resolution of his troubled relationships with the Vietnam War and with other people—especially women" (260). This yields two very interesting points. The first is that whatever problems O'Brien has with women as evident through his text are not exclusive to his relationships with women. Just as I suggested earlier when I noted the specification of all "nonveterans," this trend in O'Brien's writing is not aimed exclusively at women. It seems that way at times because women are the largest demographic categorically defined as nonveterans because of their culturally mandated exclusion from combat duty. The second point, which we will have to delve into a little deeper, is that the misogyny in O'Brien's works is reflective of the characters and context they fit into, not necessarily the author, and therefore a more productive reading would address that context. Overall, Vernon's study of "O'Brien's Women" is the most accurate because it does consider O'Brien, his works, and the cultural context (242).

Vernon denies many of the "accus[ations] ... of sexism or misogyny" by pointing out that O'Brien is "reflecting an institutionalized heritage of sexism" and misogyny, not creating one (Vernon 256). He also suggests that in many instances where sexist or misogynistic ideas are portrayed by characters in the stories "[O'Brien] does so to criticize the" specific culture that

creates those sexist or misogynistic feelings and views (Vernon 256). O'Brien directly supports this point when he clearly points out that "[he is] recording a thing, ... not necessarily endorsing it" ("Responsibly Inventing..." 18). It would be near impossible to argue that there are no seemingly misogynistic elements in O'Brien's writing because there are. However, the distinction that Vernon makes and that I support is that, contrary to the claims of critics like Smith, O'Brien does not maliciously include these elements as part of a subtextual anti-feminist agenda. By including these elements (even if he rewrites and revises parts of them) he is recording the nature of his experience. To leave these elements out is to exclude a central part of the combat veteran culture for many reasons, some of which I will discuss in the next section.

Vernon also goes beyond the metaphorical application of female figures in O'Brien's stories as metonyms for feminine qualities by suggesting that there is a "conflicting attitude toward women that [Vernon] [has] traced throughout [O'Brien's] career" (256). This certainly includes the continual betrayal of male protagonists by their female counterparts,<sup>2</sup> as well as the lack of attention attributed to female figures, especially in books like *If I Die*, *Cacciato*, and *Things*. All such findings are firmly grounded in the text and well founded. For instance, the only female figures given a voice in all of *Things* are Mary Anne Bell, who is no doubt a strategic exception that will be discussed later, and two innocents, the undeniably fictional daughter, Kathleen, and the girl from Tim's childhood, Linda. No other woman speaks or is granted a voice, but instead their thoughts and words are filtered through and paraphrased by, not only the narrator, but various other characters as well. Therefore, where O'Brien does pay attention to women or feminine qualities becomes very important. And, as Vernon suggests, O'Brien's attention to and use of women goes beyond metaphorical usage to represent feminine qualities, and it is not maliciously misogynistic. An example of this is on "[t]he very first textual

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<sup>2</sup> Vernon lists several characters in the various books this applies to on page 245 of *Soldiers Once and Still*.

appearance of a woman in O'Brien's published books" where he "uses her as a metaphor to describe the sound of a bullet" (Vernon 256). Vernon suggests that this gendering of death is "unintentional" and that "[w]e can interpret O'Brien's unconscious associations of death, imprisonment, combat, and social power with women as recycling the history of the male soldier's troublesome gendered relations with the military and society in Anglo-American culture" (256-7). Vernon, however, fails to come to much of a conclusion as to the root cause of such "troublesome gendered relations." This is precisely where I believe a trauma-induced displacement reading of O'Brien's works is beneficial to understanding the sentiment behind the writing, and therefore the writing itself.

### III. Layers of Betrayal: Trauma-induced Displacement Explains

*"The bitter invective reserved for Jane Fonda as emblem of the antiwar movement or the 'Dear John' letter written under the influence of campus radicals mark the special quality of women's betrayal during the war."* –Katherine Kinney, *Friendly Fire*, p. 145

I have established the presence of this theme of trauma-induced displacement, and I have discussed how O'Brien performs and enacts it through the form and style of his writing. Since the form and style uniformly displace readers through the common elements discussed in Chapter 3, I am going to focus here on how what O'Brien actually writes shows displacement specifically in regards to women and then explain what conclusions and understanding we can take from this. To state it simply: O'Brien's portrayal of women boils down to feelings of betrayal on a number of levels.

The inability of women to fully understand is one point of contention for O'Brien's characters. One of O'Brien's more criticized uses of a female figure is at the end of "How to Tell a True War Story." Despite criticism, the episode is a great example of this point of

contention. Tim describes the female figure as “an older woman of kindly temperament and humane policies” (*Things* 84). He explicitly notes that he is generalizing, saying that it is not always a woman of this description, but that she “[u]sually” fits this description (84). However, he does note that “[i]t’s always a woman” and that “as a rule she hates war stories” (84). She does like this one, though. “What [Tim] should do, she’ll say, is put it all behind [him]. Find new stories to tell” (*Things* 84). Tim’s silent, suppressed response to her comment is to use Rat Kiley’s language and mentally call her a “*dumb cooze* ... [b]ecause she wasn’t listening” and therefore does not understand that “[i]t [*is not*] a war story. It [*is*] a *love* story” (85). Of course, she *does* listen; she just does not *understand* the events of the story the same way O’Brien does. She is stuck on the two-dimensional plain, seeing it only from that perspective, and O’Brien is somewhere in the three-dimensional field, with a totally different understanding of the event(s). Hence, this part of the story is explicitly about Tim’s displacement from women as he repeatedly tries and continually fails to tell the story so that the listener (who in this case *is* explicitly female) understands. “All [he] can do is tell it one more time, patiently, adding and subtracting, making up a few things to get at the real truth” (*Things* 85).

“How to Tell a True War Story” is, in fact, framed by episodes illustrating characters’ displacement specifically from women. The episode described above is the closing bookend, and Rat Kiley’s letter to Curt Lemon’s sister after Lemmon dies is the opening bookend. Rat writes the letter and “pours his heart out” but never hears from the addressee, Lemon’s sister (68). His response is filled with anger, ““The dumb cooze never writes back”” (69). Of course, Rat is writing the letter to stay connected with his dead friend through connecting with his friend’s family. Rat tells stories about Lemon to a member of Lemon’s family and even tells that family member that “he’ll look her up when the war’s over” (68). However, Lemmon’s sister

does not know about or understand the stories about Lemmon—she’s reading a letter from someone she does not know about a side of her brother she never sees. Rat gets upset when he realizes that he cannot even talk to his best friend’s sister about the friend. She can see her brother only through the two-dimensional plain and he sees his friend through the three-dimensional field, which threatens her limited understanding of her own brother. Those irreconcilable differences in the point of view exemplify displacement. And, because Rat’s understanding of Curt Lemon is mostly based on the sharing or witnessing of traumatic experiences, Rat’s unanswered letter thus exemplifies trauma-induced displacement just as Tim’s inability to communicate with the woman at the end of the story is based on his witnessing a traumatic event of which she has no first-hand knowledge. O’Brien’s work has several examples of this same type of relationship stilted by trauma-induced displacement. David Todd and Marla Dempsey is an example. Norman Bowker and pretty much everyone else, including his father, is another.

However, women are not treated poorly solely because of their inability to understand. Another reason is their track record for consistent betrayal of male characters (usually protagonists) in O’Brien’s works. For instance, Martha does not love Jimmy Cross, and many claim that her signing the letters “Love,” sending pictures, and such is actually leading him on. Henry Dobbin’s girlfriend dumps him via letter. Mary Anne Bell leaves Mark Fossie. The unnamed soldier in “In the Field” is searching for a picture of his girl, Billie, because “[s]he won’t *send* another one” because “[s]he’s not even [his] *girl* anymore,” the implication clearly being that she has dumped him (*Things* 172). Curt Lemon’s sister never even replies to Rat’s letter. Vernon even points out several examples throughout O’Brien’s career, starting with *If I Die* and continuing right into *July, July*. Marla Dempsey cheats on David Todd twice, the first

time with a married man. The second affair culminates in her leaving David on Christmas morning. Spook Spinelli marries one man and shortly thereafter starts a relationship with a second man, in essence a second marriage. Even with both men reluctantly agreeing to the arrangement, she still ventures out and involves herself with a third man. As if that were not enough, she chases after Billy McMann at the reunion while suggestively leading on and eventually spending the night with Marv Bertel, who is in love with her and always has been. Ellie Abbott cheats on her husband. Dorothy Stier, of course, betrays Billy McMann, promising to go to Canada with him and then never getting on the plane. All of these examples constitute a direct betrayal of prominent male characters.<sup>3</sup> Vernon points out that the women in O'Brien's stories often betray the male characters over and over. The Tim character in *If I Die*, presumably the same as O'Brien himself since it is a memoir, "receives a letter from his girlfriend who now tours Europe with her new boyfriend" (Vernon 244-245). Even if that event is not real (in the factual sense), it is frighteningly similar to O'Brien's assertion in "The Vietnam in Me," an essay published in 1994, that a graduate student he was dating exclusively left him for another man after accompanying O'Brien on an important return trip to Vietnam. In almost every case, the betrayal involves some type of removal on the part of the female. The girl dumps the guy—she removes herself from the relationship. The girl cheats on the guy—the girl removes her loyalty for the guy. The girl does not respond to the letter—the girl removes herself from Rat's discussion of her brother, or, at the very least, denies the invitation. These removals, of course, create displacement not only through betrayal, but also through the emotional and psychological distance created.

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<sup>3</sup> I would like to note that O'Brien's male characters are just as unsavory. For example: Marv Bertel told outrageous lies to his wife to get her to initially sleep with him, and Billy McMann is a draft dodger.

This form of overt betrayal does not complete the picture either. I contend that O'Brien himself, as his various characters reflect, feels betrayed by women in general for another reason to which all of this adds insult to injury. The reason has to do with why Alex Vernon, myself, and O'Brien himself assert that O'Brien is not a misogynistic sexist. Tim O'Brien calls himself "much more a feminist than the so-called feminists criticizing me" ("Responsibly Inventing..." 17). His justification for this bold statement comes from his belief that women are equal to men in every way, and should be treated as such. He specifically points to the draft and the fact that our "culture ... [has unfairly] excluded women from the responsibility of taking part in a social phenomenon: war"—a phenomenon in which O'Brien believes women are perfectly capable taking part ("Responsibly Inventing..." 19).

O'Brien's assertion that women are fundamentally the same as men, and therefore capable of the same things as men, comes through vividly in his story "Sweatheart of the Song Tra Bong." It is the story of Mary Anne Bell, "[t]his cute blonde—just a kid, just barely out of high school"—who flies into the firebase where her boyfriend, a medic in Rat Kiley's previous unit, is stationed (*Things* 90). Mary Anne, a "seventeen-year-old doll ..., perky and fresh-faced, like a cheerleader visiting the opposing team's locker room", and her boyfriend, Mark Fossie, start off playing house (96). She is curious, though, and "pick[s] up on things [about war] fast" (97). Rat even parallels her learning experience in Vietnam to the learning experience of other *Things* soldiers'. He tells Tim and the other members of the all-male platoon, "when we first got here—all of us—we were real young and innocent, full of romantic bullshit, but we learned pretty damn quick. And so did Mary Anne" (97). She eventually starts going on ambushes and patrols with the "Greenies," the Green Berets Special Forces soldiers who live separately on "the edge of the perimeter" and come and go "magically ... moving like shadows" (92). She starts

living with them, breaking ties with her boyfriend, and, according to the story, disappears into the jungle one day. O'Brien asserts that,

["Sweatheart of the Song Tra Bong"] ... [says], in part, if women were to serve in combat they would be experiencing precisely what I am, the same conflicts, the same paradoxes, the same terrors, the same guilts, the same seductions of the soul. They would be going to the same dark side of the human hemisphere, the dark side of the moon, the dark side of their own psyches. It seems to me that the story is a fable—that it's meant to make explicit that which I thought was implicit in my work all along. ("Responsibly Inventing..." 21)

O'Brien's explanation is certainly consistent with the story itself. Mary Anne is, if anything, more naturally suited for the war she inserts herself into voluntarily than any of the male draftees, such as Rat Kiley or Mark Fossie. Some feminist critics take issue with the story indicating that "Mary Anne's savagery and monstrosity function to solidify male bonds and validate the humanity of the more 'normal' soldiers" (Smith 36). However, a lack of textual evidence supporting accusations of "savagery and monstrosity" indicate that there exists a more productive reading. I propose that O'Brien's story simply and clearly demonstrates the basic ability of a female to react and respond to war in the same manner as a man. Rat Kiley explicitly illustrates this:

"...She was a girl, that's all. I mean, if it was a guy, everybody'd say, Hey, no big deal, he got caught up in the Nam shit, he got seduced by the Greenies. See what I mean? You got these blinders on about women. How gentle and peaceful they are ... Pure garbage. You got to get rid of that sexist attitude." (107)

O'Brien subscribes to this sentiment, expressed by his characters in rather vulgar terms, and I contend that it is the pivotal reason he, a) feels displacement from women (which is reflected through his characters in his writing), and b) not only treats them with displacement, but animosity as well, as he feels their absence in combat as a kind of betrayal.

The resulting feelings from this betrayal deepen the chasm of displacement. This is why O'Brien constantly portrays women betraying men by "participat[ing] in both [sin and evil] in their own ways" ("Responsibly Inventing..." 20). Men, of course, are at fault for women's exclusion from combat, and O'Brien clearly does not hold women responsible for that law. For example, O'Brien's veteran character, Harvey, from *Northern Lights* directs his animosity at being drafted at the (male) members of his draft board (22, 24). Mitchell Sanders does the same thing in "Spin" by sending body lice to his draft board, which is described without any indication of gender (*Things* 30). O'Brien's sense of betrayal by women is appropriately not a result of being drafted, but rather of the attitude women display towards the draft. He clearly states his belief that, "[w]omen, by and large, in western society take it for granted that they don't have to serve in combat, ... [i]t's just a given" ("Responsibly Inventing..." 20). O'Brien feels betrayed, not only because he believes women take for granted that they do not serve, but also because, in his opinion, they generally fail "to acknowledge that men are being treated unfairly when they are sent to war" ("Responsibly Inventing..." 20). In O'Brien's view, by not outwardly recognizing these inequalities, women have betrayed him and his comrades. Sadly, some women go farther than to simply fail to acknowledge the issue. Susan Jacoby actually belittles draft-eligible men, referring to "the saga of the conscience stricken young man who made the agonizing choice" as "mythic nonsense" (193). This hostile attitude constitutes betrayal because, on top of demonstrating everything discussed so far, it passes unfair judgment on those subjected

to the draft. Although Jacoby's sentiment does not accurately represent all women of the time period, it does represent some of the more vocal sentiments expressed by citizens. The most notable example is in anti-war demonstrations that included protesting and spitting on returning soldiers. Since the anti-war movement was not a gender specific cause, women would have participated in this alongside men, and therefore veterans would recognize those women's participation and sentiments. All these levels of betrayal through taken-for-granted exclusion are made worse when, because women do not participate in combat, they do not understand what (male) combat veterans have gone through or how a veteran might see the world differently post-combat. This implicitly makes the male veteran feel displaced or excluded because of something he (usually) has no choice about or control over.

Add in the bad feeling associated with returning home and, not only feeling displaced, but also being told either implicitly or explicitly that he is "messed up" or suffering from a "disorder," and even more animosity builds up. Marla Dempsey best exemplifies this when she records David Todd cursing in his sleep and plays the tape back for him, citing how it "'scares [her]'" because "'[t]hat voice. It's you, but it's not you—all that swearing. Whoever it is, I feel like he's dangerous. Like he could hurt somebody'" (*July, July 276*). Here Marla actively represents the societal point of view suggesting that David's lasting behavioral impacts from his experience are socially unacceptable. Marla makes this clear citing that he "scares" her and that he is "dangerous," which is explicitly negative. While the common member of society understands Marla's position, veterans or trauma survivors are more likely to see this episode a different way—the same way David sees it—as a invalidation of his traumatic experience. His response to her starts with an attempt to explain that "'[she] do[es]n't understand'" and then shifts to a more pointed, possibly irritated or angry, response when "[h]e [shakes] his head hard,

reache[s] down and rap[s] his knuckles against his prosthesis[ saying,] ‘See that? Chop off a leg, watch sixteen guys die, smell the rot. See if you don’t cuss in your sleep’” (*July, July 276*).

David reads Marla’s approach as exactly what it is, a societal belief that his behavioral changes are not socially acceptable. David most likely does not care if his behavioral shift is socially acceptable because the experience he undergoes far outweighs societal expectations that do not truly take his experience into consideration. Marla actually demonstrates a marginalization of David’s experience and feelings through this implicit suggestion that something in his behavior needs altering. It is unlikely that David wants to suffer from “[n]ightmares” (*July, July 276*).

However, his psyche holding onto that memory signifies the importance of the experience, and therefore challenges the societal view that his behavioral changes are accurately interpreted as inappropriate. This view constitutes a marginalization of his experience—implying either that the experience is not bad enough to warrant those actions and feelings or that his handling of those feelings is unacceptable. Subscribing to this view is essentially like telling David to “get over it,” which completely invalidates his experience and his feelings about the experience. It is no wonder why this kind of response generates feelings of betrayal in trauma survivors, in this case, veterans like O’Brien and David Todd.

If we add in being cheated on or dumped, which obviously exemplifies betrayal, we have a recipe for some very bad blood. If I were to streamline this logic from a veteran’s point of view, it would generally read something like this:

You watched me go off to combat, and you did not even suggest that there might be an inequitable practice in sending men but not women. Then, I came back and you didn’t understand me or what I’ve been through. And, instead of really trying to understand, or at the very least acknowledging the validity of the way I feel,

you suggest or outright say, “You’re messed up. You need some help.” Then, to top it all off, you leave or cheat on me and extricate yourself from the situation, taking the easy way out and leaving me to figure out how to fit in and function again.

This, of course, happens to vastly varying degrees, and may only surface to the full extent outlined here in extreme circumstances, but the sentiment is the same. Look at how O’Brien writes women. He excludes them simply because they were not there, and when he does write them in, they are committing at *least* one of these sins against the male character (except the innocents and, of course, Mary Anne, who serves to illustrate all of this). There are a plethora of similar elements that indicate misogyny in O’Brien’s writings. However, O’Brien filters these elements through narrators and characters. So, while we can read these elements as evidence of an agenda, we could more accurately read them through this larger theme I have suggested because, by creating distance between the reader and the women, O’Brien achieves two ends. First, he makes readers feel displaced from the women by not allowing readers to interact directly with female characters. Second, since there is the consistent presence of characters and narrators, all of whom O’Brien overtly sets up to be unreliable and unsavory, these elements are part of the story and should to be rhetorically analyzed through the characters and narrators that present them. When we do this, we see a laundry list of reasons why O’Brien’s male characters feel betrayed. All the issues of betrayal discussed thus far result in the male characters feeling displaced and encapsulate the reasons why *July, July* is so interesting—because it illustrates several different points in a broader context within O’Brien’s writing.

#### IV. Don’t Forget *July, July*

*July, July* illustrates that displacement from women results from layered feelings of betrayal (also a kind of trauma) but does not blame any character unless she has explicitly committed a sin listed above. Most of the women in *July, July* do not have any deep or direct interaction with David Todd (the most overtly O'Brien-like character), yet most of them are adulterers, liars, and abandoners. O'Brien views women through a tinted lens and subsequently portrays them in the manner he sees them. Some are good people; some are not. Because most have good qualities as well as serious flaws, they are essentially the same as O'Brien's male characters.

*July, July* also clearly illustrates that O'Brien understands that trauma-induced displacement is not exclusively a male experience—women suffer from the same thing, just not through war. That establishes trauma-induced displacement as a broader, more encompassing theme, rather than one limited to war-related traumas. For example, Dorothy Stier's trauma is breast cancer. Jan Huebner's is a thirty-year marriage to a hopelessly unfaithful man. Whether the book is a response to the feminist critics or not, O'Brien does show intense "interest in all these female characters" in "a character-driven book" ("Press Release..."). O'Brien claims that it was partially a kind of experiment to prove he was capable of portraying women, as opposed to what I have called "female figures" ("Press Release...").

More important, it seemed to me that most of the fiction set in the watershed era of the late 1960s focuses on stories about men—the pressures of war, draft-dodging, and so on. But for every man who went to Vietnam, or for every man who went to Canada, there were countless sisters and girlfriends and wives and mothers, each of whom had her own fascinating story, *her own tragedies and suffering, her own healing afterward*. ("Press Release...")

The scale of traumas still seems to be weighted towards the males in O'Brien's writing (even somewhat in *July, July*), but the connotation of O'Brien including so many developed female characters, who are neither wholly villain or wholly victim, suggests his recognition of the larger picture—a fuller scope of displacement in society due to various traumas. I believe this reading of O'Brien's work suggests a few important points. First, there is non-adversarial reason O'Brien directs so much animosity towards women: they represent and are a large group within society that either causes or aggravates feelings of displacement, and O'Brien is trying to reflect both the causes and feelings of displacement. Second, O'Brien seems to blame women for displacement for the most part; however, *July, July* possibly recognizes that, in many cases, women are not fully aware of their effect on their male counterparts. Third, O'Brien's avalanche of characters with these same basic problems indicates a suggestion (if not an outright screaming) that the problem lies not within the displaced trauma victims but within society's treatment of those individuals. O'Brien's inclusion of women in recent works to his laundry list of seemingly "damaged" and "broken" characters furthers this suggestion by making that list more societally inclusive.

Furthermore, O'Brien's application of the trauma-induced displacement theme to female as well as male characters allows readers to use that reoccurring, underlying theme to understand the characters, their situations, their feelings, and their dynamic relationships with other characters. Granted, it is not always a startling revelation. For instance, with O'Brien's treatment of women we have simply identified a multi-layered, betrayal-based feeling of animosity and separation that largely explains the presence, absence, and particular use of women in O'Brien's writing as not necessarily misogynistic banter, and more than metaphorical representation of feminine qualities. This shows a deeper, more complicated level that

simultaneously deals with animosity and respect, as well as a desire to tell one's story to someone and a listener who categorically cannot truly hear and understand the story. Because this perspective is deeper and more complicated and conflicted, it is also more human, more real, truer in feeling to what the author is trying to portray.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion: The Listening Post

*“Like our fathers, we came home from war to pursue careers and loves and cars and houses and dollars and vacations and all the pleasures of peace. Who can blame us? Wasn’t peace the purpose? ... [H]ere at home, weren’t the shrinks and scriptwriters and politicians telling us, at least by implication, that we ought to be seeking social and psychological readjustment? Heal the wounds, pick up the pieces.”*  
—Tim O’Brien, *“We’ve Adjusted Too Well”*

I hope that by now it is clear that the central driving theme encompassing all of Tim O’Brien’s writing is that of trauma-induced displacement and that the various elements O’Brien’s form and style perform and enact that theme upon the reader. I am not denying other prominent themes, but merely suggesting this one unifying theme that readers can use to understand O’Brien’s writing on another level. That level, I contend, is at the heart of the issues Tim O’Brien handles in his various works. It is a level most combat veterans innately understand and most others overlook or classify as metaphorical or symbolic. And, by recognizing it, society can not only better understand the literature but also the generation that it comes from and possibly even subsequent generations with similar experiences—specifically mine. More than that, though, Tim O’Brien has a clearly outlined agenda to systematically re-inflict his generation’s traumas on American readership in an effort to revive a community through trauma-induced displacement and suggest that these displaced individuals, rather than be “fixed” or “adjusted,” need to be listened to.

I realize now that this thesis is probably the most self-serving work I have ever produced in my academic career. I have spent numerous pages hammering away at the point I firmly believe O’Brien is trying to make. By doing so, I hope to not only unlock deeper and truer understandings of O’Brien’s writing but also of his generation and my

generation as well. My hope is that people will recognize the validity of what I have said about O'Brien's writing and use it as a springboard to reevaluate our societal approach to his literature and to those men and women for whom it speaks. If I can get people to recognize Rat Kiley's or David Todd's perspective as valid and not part of a "disorder," then this has been a successful venture. At the very least, we as a society need to go on Listening Post (LP) without preconceived perceptions of what is normal or abnormal, and just listen and learn.

When soldiers were still coming and going in and out of Vietnam, veterans were scattered all over the country. And we widely know and accept that they were treated differently than their fathers were upon returning home from World War II. I have never heard a story of a World War II veteran being spit on, but I have heard it all too often of Vietnam veterans. So, what did they do, many of them? They "[forgot]—misplaced, repressed, [chose] to ignore" ("We've Adjusted Too Well" 205). O'Brien wants them to remember—that is why he tells his war stories. That is why he tells them over and over again. Maybe O'Brien's writing is a therapeutic healing through rehashing the horrors of what happened. Even if the wound is un-healable, at least veterans can find comfort in a community of others who truly understand because they were there and they saw, did, and experienced the same things. More likely it is a forced reliving or re-suffering, a forced reconnection "with the horror of war ... [t]he guilt, the fear, the painful urgencies" (O'Brien, "We've Adjusted..." 205). O'Brien claims that "[veterans] look back on [their] own histories with a kind of numb disbelief, as though none of it really happened, ... [a]nd I fear that we are back where we started" (O'Brien, *We've Adjusted...* 206-7). Without a memory of what happened in Vietnam, we are subject to walking blindly into

the same trap, stepping on the same booby-trapped artillery round and getting blown into the trees like Curt Lemon, over and over again. After all, “soldiers, having been there, have witnessed the particulars which give validity and meaning to the abstract. That’s an important kind of knowledge, for it reminds us of the stakes: human lives, human limbs. Real lives, real limbs. Nothing abstract” (O’Brien, “We’ve Adjusted...” 205-6).

Remembering can curb “America’s infinite capacity to chimerically adjust to, simplistically remember, and quickly forget a war that inconveniently challenged this country’s righteous, positivistic paradigm,” the very thing that has been “troubling” O’Brien for more than four decades because “[w]e’ve adjusted too well” (Ringnalda 91; O’Brien, “We’ve Adjusted...” 205). “One of the reasons that [O’Brien] write[s] ... is to jar people into looking at important things” (O’Brien, “Tim O’Brien: Maybe So” 137).

So, if the stories can make the reader feel some semblance of what O’Brien felt through the narratives themselves and through their performative construction, then readers might look at the issues in the real world with, at the very least, an appreciation for that which they do not understand, which brings us to the next point: asserting the validity of alternate understandings of the world due to intense traumatic experiences outside the realm of understanding for the majority of society.

America simply did not—and, in fact, could not—understand. And, because America sent these men overseas, this lack of understanding constitutes a betrayal. The men were sent over, and instead of returning to a grateful nation, they “return[ed] alone to the United States and another battleground,” one where they were the outcasts (Herzog, *Vietnam War Stories* 167). It seems reasonable that returning, drafted soldiers would feel betrayed by America when they were “tag[ged]” as “‘baby killers’ involved in

an immoral war” or “characterized . . . as ‘losers’” upon returning from fighting in a horrific war most never wanted anything to do with in the first place (Herzog, *Vietnam War Stories* 169). Like Norman Bowker or David Todd, it seems all veterans really wanted was for someone to listen and understand—at least try to understand. Because women were categorically excluded from the entire cycle of draft-war-return, O’Brien picks on them more than any other demographic. But it is not malicious—it is a result of a series of adverse and unfair conditions and events—and we cannot blame him for those feelings. O’Brien writes of a girl in “Sweatheart of the Song Tra Bong” named Mary Anne Bell, who “[u]nlike all the other women in [*Things*], . . . asks questions and listens carefully” (Smith 33). And, not only does she sincerely ask and listen, she ““most definitely learn[s]” (*Things* 97). She is the opposite of the “prototypical figure of the woman incapable of understanding the war” (Smith 26). Mary Anne is the opposite of ““those girls back home”” and ““how clean and innocent they all are, how they’ll never understand any of this, not in a billion years. Try to tell them about it, they’ll just stare at you with those big round candy eyes. They won’t understand zip. It’s like trying to tell somebody what chocolate tastes like’ . . . ‘Or shit”” (*Things* 113). O’Brien writes Mary Anne because he knows she can exist, but does not, at least as far as he knows. So, he laments over women like his lost love, Kate, who “[he] doubt[s] . . . remembers a word” despite her accompanying him on an intense and personal return trip to Vietnam 25 years after his service there (“The Vietnam in Me”). And he does so alone, in the middle of the night, in his apartment in-between other solitary activities like laundry, medication, lifting weights, writing, and buying groceries, because of the “casualty rott[ed] in the

space between [O'Brien and Kate]"—the displacement that apparently drove them apart just like David Tood and Marla Dempsey ("The Vietnam in Me").

O'Brien paints the same basic picture in *Things* over and over: the displaced soldier. And it is essentially the same as the picture that has appeared in his other works *If I Die*, *Northern Lights*, *Going After Cacciato*, *In the Lake of the Woods*, and *July, July*. In *July, July* O'Brien writes women and nonveteran men into the same predicament. This is his effort to broaden the scope of his subtextual push. By including women and nonveteran men with their problems in his later fiction like *July, July*, he captures a larger swath of the population suffering from slightly different versions of the same issues. And, through this broad inclusion, he demonstrates not only the prevalence of this theme as an appropriate representation to real life but also that the societally-held and supported stance that those suffering from symptoms of PTSD, or some similar disorder, are in fact not necessarily "disordered" or "messed-up." O'Brien demonstrates, instead, that these people are enlightened and possess an understanding of the world that society has yet to recognize as valid only because it cannot understand.

*Things*, *July, July*, and his other works are, on one level, reactions against society and its *DSM-IV*. The stories are defiant texts thrust in the face of all those who say that "[w]hat [they] should do ... is put it all behind [them]. Find new stories to tell" (*Things* 84). They are defiance against all those who suggest forgetting or not feeling so strongly, and thus invalidating the experience, the feelings, the whole shebang. The stories are defiant declarations against those who "[want] answers ... [want] to know what the fuckin' story is" (*Things* 75). They are defiance against the expectation of a nice, neat little story—a history—with confirmable facts and a nice, neat little "THE END" on the

last page. If you listen, you realize that is all O'Brien wants you to do. Listen to Mitchell Sanders,

“The moral, I mean. Nobody listens. Nobody hears nothin’. Like that fatass colonel. The politicians, all the civilian types. Your girlfriend. My girlfriend. Everybody’s sweet little virgin girlfriend. What they need is to go out on LP. The vapors, man. Trees and rocks—you got to *listen* to your enemy.” (*Things* 76)

All O'Brien is trying to do is get everyone to listen because, if they do, his writing is going to displace them just a tiny bit comparatively and maybe, just maybe, they will understand one iota of what it is like to be drafted and displaced from society. Just one iota though, because the only way to fully know is to go through it for real, something one might not opt to do if he or she realized the truth and validity of Master Sergeant Johnny Ever's wise words, “I honest-to-God have to recommend bailing. Cut your losses. Check out. Right now, Davy, you don't know what wounded *is*” (*July, July* 35). But O'Brien cannot send the world through the experience, so he tells stories because “[o]nly stories ... will have the power to make people weep” (O'Brien, “Keynote Address” 9).

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