

Writing True War Stories

Remembering the Vietnam War Trauma through Fiction in North American and Vietnamese
Literature

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Introduction

“You can tell a true war story by the questions you ask. Somebody tells a story, let’s say, and afterwards you ask, ‘Is it true?’ and if the answer matters, you’ve got your answer.”
 Tim O’Brien, 79

Throughout his book *The Things They Carried*, Tim O’Brien tells stories about men he met in the war; some of these people existed, some of them did not, yet all of their stories are true, he claims. In fact, O’Brien reiterates multiple times throughout his book that some of the events in these stories are made up—figments of his imagination—yet insists that they are all true. To tell a true war story, he argues, you cannot stick to the facts, they are far removed from the more important aspects of “truth in war,” and for O’Brien, imagination is a much more potent carrier of this truth. It is as John H. Timmerman writes: “The life of imagination is real precisely because it embraces the experience, moving beyond factual data” (103). When O’Brien attempts to pass on his experiences during the war he does not write about the factual matters of the war, but rather the emotional ones, because the facts cannot accurately represent the experience. O’Brien’s stories attempt to show the truth beyond the truth. The question of truth that is posed to these stories does not require an answer, as the epigraph to the book states: “Those who have had any such experience as the author will see its truthfulness at once.” If the truth of the war lies within these experiential stories, then it is natural that only those who have shared the experience will see the truthfulness of these stories. Bao Ninh is one of the many who have shared in these experiences – he was on the other side of the same war.

It is remarkable that on the other side of the Vietnam War, another soldier –author has been preoccupied with similar issues. Bao Ninh adopts the same truth telling strategy in his book on the Vietnam War, aptly titled *The Sorrow of War*. Throughout the book we follow a soldier by the name of Kien, from before, during and after the war. He is one of the very few survivors of a large brigade of soldiers that was slaughtered in the Jungle of Screaming Souls.

Like *The Things They Carried* the book consists of different stories that are not told in chronological order; they more closely resemble the ramblings of a man close to the edge of insanity. It is obvious that the war has taken its toll on the poor man, and it seems that throughout the story Kien gets increasingly hopeless. Like O'Brien's book, *The Sorrow of War* is highly metafictional: it calls attention specifically to the process of writing about the war, how reliving those memories for the sake of putting them on paper can be cathartic but also extremely confronting. Sometimes writing things down can help you move past them, other times you remember things that you had long ago pushed away and they come back to haunt you a second time around. At the end of the book, the reader is told that the author had merely been given the manuscript of the soldier, and has collected and edited these stories so that they could be published. The text supposes that Bao Ninh is not the actual author of the stories, but a soldier by the name of Kien, who one day left his apartment building and never came back.

A short text on the second page of my edition of *The Sorrow of War* explains that Bao Ninh, much like Kien, "served with the Glorious 27th Youth Brigade" in the Vietnam War. This brigade was made up of five-hundred soldiers, "he is one of ten who survived." This is remarkably similar to Kien's experiences in the book and it raises questions about the truth behind many of the stories. The reader is never fully aware of what parts of the book are made up, and what parts have actually happened. This is of course similar to the way in which O'Brien handles the issues of truth and authenticity in *The Things They Carried* and for Bao Ninh too truth was precisely what he wanted to convey; a truth that like *The Things They Carried* could only be understood by "Those who have had any such experience as the author."

In this thesis I will conduct a comparative reading of *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien and *The Sorrow of War* by Bao Ninh in order to explore their approach to truth and

“true war writing”: in different ways, both texts show that the truth of a historical event lies not necessarily within the factual information relating to it, but in the experience of those who lived it. Though O’Brien and Ninh stood on opposing sides of the battlefield, the way they write about their experiences is remarkably similar. Both O’Brien and Ninh have resorted to using fictional means to convey their experiences in the war in a manner that they seem to feel is more closely related to the truth of these experiences than any factual account could ever be. Though these authors have used similar means to convey their stories their styles of writing greatly differ from one another. O’Brien wrote a meta-fictional autobiography calling attention to the untruths and truths that it conveys, and Ninh employs the found-manuscript trope to call attention to the question of truth. Ninh does not directly question the authenticity of his own text, but rather gives the reader enough *reason* to question it. By comparing the two works I hope to more thoroughly answer the following question: In what way do O’Brien and Ninh employ fictional elements in retelling the traumatic experience of the Vietnam War?

In order to answer this question I will do a comparative close reading of *The Things They Carried* and *The Sorrow of War*, highlighting the similarities, but also the differences in their experiences. While a lot has been written on O’Brien’s work, there has been very little scholarship on Ninh’s text in English. There has not been any research comparing these two works either, so my analysis will be the first of its kind. I will organise my analysis around Hayden White’s “Modernist Event”. White precisely discusses the modernist strategies of remembrance employed by O’Brien and Ninh in their works. White states that within modernist works “everything is presented as if it were of the same ontological order, both real and imaginary ... with the result that the referential function of the images of events is etiolated” (19). This means that by positioning both truth and fiction on the same level the author calls attention to the constructed nature of not only the story, but of history as well.

Another key point of reference for my theoretical framework will be Linda Hutcheon's "Historiographic Metafiction: 'The Pastime of Past Time'", a text primarily concerned with identifying what historiographic metafiction is, a term that I feel fits both Tim O'Brien and Bao Ninh's works rather well. According to Hutcheon "historiographic metafiction suggests the continuing relevance of [the opposition of fiction and fact], even if it be a problematic one. Such novels both install and then blur the line between fiction and history" (113). As I have mentioned before both Ninh and O'Brien call attention to the constructed nature of their narratives, albeit in different ways.

The first chapter of this thesis will first briefly situate the two novels within the literary tradition that these novels are part of and then move to a textual analysis of Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*. The second chapter will focus on Bao Ninh's *The Sorrow of War* as well as exploring frame narrative. In these two chapters my primary focus will be looking at how these texts employ fictional elements, and the function of these fictional elements. Then I will conclude this thesis with a more thorough comparison of the two works.

The Things They Carried

In the story “Speaking of Courage” Norman Bowker, one of O’Brien’s fellow Vietnam War veterans is driving in his Chevrolet. The war has come to an end and he is driving on a road in his hometown, following “its seven mile loop around the lake” (139). He is reminiscing about the times he enjoyed prior to the war, as well as thinking about talking to the people he knew, perhaps to tell them about the medal he almost won. In the end he is incapable of talking to these people: he wants to share his experiences, but he does not want to burden those who are willing to listen; there is also the impossibility that they would ever understand. They got married and had kids, settled down in a nice house in that quiet town; he, Norman, almost saved a fellow soldier from death – almost. In “Notes”, the story that directly follows “Speaking of Courage” O’Brien tells us that Norman’s story “was written in 1975 at the suggestion of Norman Bowker, who three years later hanged himself in the locker room of a YMCA in his hometown in central Iowa” (155). People’s unwillingness to listen to the soldiers who came back from the war in combination with the impossibility of even understanding what they went through meant that a lot of soldiers ultimately could not or would not share their experiences with other non-veterans. This meant that many of them were stuck, looping these experiences in their mind, never reaching that moment of catharsis; like a car circling a lake, never quite finding its destination.

Some soldiers took to writing, sharing their experiences with the paper of their typewriter. But how do you tell a war story, and how can you even hope to make your readers understand what you went through? There is a long tradition of writing about wars, dating all the way back to Ancient Greece with Homer’s *Iliad*. These works often put the reader in the middle of the battlefield, describing the wars from a close-up perspective. However, only fairly recently have veterans of these wars themselves taken to writing about them. In the decades leading up to the First World War education became more widespread; this meant

that many of the soldiers that were witness to the atrocities of this war could then write about them. A seemingly impossible task lay before the authors of this generation, there was, as Margot Norris describes in her *Writing War in the Twentieth Century*, a feeling of urgency for the soldier-authors to “tell an untellable tale to home front audiences,” but how to describe the horror of a war of such magnitude? (58). For many people it was difficult to grasp the immense amount of pain and suffering that the war had caused, and it was not just the magnitude of the suffering, but also the impersonal nature of the suffering that made it hard to comprehend. With the advent of new technology the relationship between the people and the weapons changed fundamentally; now that bombs and gas were part of the active arsenal of opposing forces whole battalions could be blasted into non-existence without coming face-to-face with the enemy. This new kind of warfare took its toll, and many people lost their faith in a teleological idea of history, that humanity is constantly progressing as time moves forward. Paul Fussel states in his *The Great War and Modern Memory* that the First World War “was a hideous embarrassment to the prevailing Meliorist myth which had dominated the public consciousness for a century. It reversed this Idea of Progress” (7). Some authors took it upon themselves to show to the world the horror of this new kind of war. Erich Maria Remarque was one of these authors, his novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* showed a side of the First World War that no one except for its veterans had seen. *All Quiet on the Western Front* is not a factual account of the war, but rather a personalised story focussed on experiences. It is an autobiographical story based on Remarque’s experiences during the war, but the novel features some surreal events and it is built around fictional characters. Even though the events described in *All Quiet on the Western Front* did not happen exactly the way they were described, some soldiers still experienced something quite like these events, and the emotions that the characters experience are something they can relate to. Hayden White discusses the First World War as an example of what he calls a

“modernist event”. According to Hayden White such an event “[does] not lend [itself] to explanation in terms of categories underwritten by tradition humanistic historiography” this does not mean however, that such an event cannot be represented, it only means that “techniques of representation somewhat different from those developed at the height of artistic realism may be called for” (21-29). Because of this, writers started to value facts and fictions the same within their stories, presenting everything within their works “as if it were of the same ontological order, both real and imaginary” (19). It did not matter whether an event described within a historical novel actually happened, all that mattered was whether it accurately represented the experience of that which had actually happened. This emotive form of historical fiction became a literary tradition, and many soldier-authors followed in Remarque’s steps. Veterans of World War I and II, the Korean War, and also the Vietnam War wrote about their experiences, shining a more personal light on the horrific nature of war. In this context, O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* became one of the most well regarded works on this topic. But what made this particular book so special?

The Things They Carried is part of another literary tradition, the tradition of metafiction. Just like many authors before him, O’Brien calls attention to the constructed nature of his work, and the process of writing it. The story titled “Notes” mentioned previously gives a glimpse of O’Brien’s writing process. He writes about writing “Speaking of Courage”, how Norman Bowker requested him to write a story like it. He also talks about how the first draft of the story failed to do the subject matter justice.

Almost immediately, though, there was a sense of failure. The details of Norman Bowker’s story were missing. In this original version, which I still conceived as part of the novel, I had been forced to omit the shit field and the rain and the death of Kiowa, replacing this material with events that better fit the book’s narrative. As a consequence I’d lost the natural

counterpoint between the lake and the field. A metaphoric unity was broken. What the piece needed, and did not have, was the terrible killing power of that shit field. (157-158)

This quote illustrates how some details within these stories are deliberately constructed, and some are even omitted to create a more coherent and symbolic narrative. On numerous occasions it is stated within *The Things They Carried* that some of the stories are made up, that the events described did not actually take place. The story titled “Good Form” starts with the following statement: “It’s time to be blunt. I’m forty-three years old, true, and I’m a writer now, and a long time ago I walked through Quang Ngai Province as a foot soldier. Almost everything else is invented” (179). O’Brien does not see this invention as problematic; he looks at it from a point of view akin to that present in many works of historiographic metafiction. According to Linda Hutcheon, historiographic metafiction novels “blur the line between fiction and history,” they purposefully disrupt this dichotomy of history and fiction, by calling attention to the idea that history is not necessarily factual (113). Representations of the past, whether it is a certain text, a photograph, or even a film, these are chosen by historians to “signify whatever [he or she] intends,” even an archive is curated, and thus not as objective as some would like to believe (122). Highlighting the idea that history is not factual opens up the possibility of representing historical events by means of fictional stories. Sometimes stating the base facts is not enough. Marilyn Wesley in her article “Truth and Fiction in Tim O’Brien’s ‘If I Die in a Combat Zone’ and ‘The Things They Carried’” talks about the differences between the representations of the war in both of these novels. She states that

the incidents in *If I Die in a Combat Zone* ... do not vary significantly from the incidents fictionalized in the stories of *The Things They Carried* ... But whereas the first book relies on the standard of representation of truth, the

second, abandoning literary realism, comes closer to presenting a polemic vision that insists on the problematic nature of the Vietnam experience. (2)

By writing about the things that happened in Vietnam in a more surreal way, O'Brien, according to Wesley, comes closer to truly representing the Vietnam experience. Soldiers during the Vietnam War were subjected to guerrilla warfare, the nature of which made them often doubt their own senses; this experience is more accurately reflected in a surreal style of writing. But why is this truthful representation of the war so important to people like O'Brien and Norman Bowker?

In "Good From" O'Brien states that stories allow him to "attach faces to grief and love," they allow him to recall things that he never committed to memory because he was "afraid to look" (179-180). The book is a way for O'Brien to remember, remember his former colleagues and friends, the times they spent together, but also the nameless faces and the faceless masses that linger in his mind. He uses his stories to repurpose these memories, to give them a shape that can last within his mind; dressing up his mental wounds so that they can heal without scarring over and over again. Writing about the war is a way of coming to terms with what happened, as Robin Silbergleid states in his "Making Things Present: Tim O'Brien's Autobiographical Metafiction": "If using 'story-truth' helps the reader picture the disaster of Vietnam, instilling a sense of reality and responsibility through fictional presence, it also allows the writer-narrator to come to terms with his experience and, as Lieutenant Jimmy Cross says, 'carry on,'" (152).

In the final story of the book "The Lives of the Dead" O'Brien calls special attention to this idea of remembrance. The story is about O'Brien's first encounter with a dead body in the war and how it reminded him of his first love, a girl by the name of Linda. She died when she was nine years old, and when O'Brien was in love with her. He tells the story of his first

date with Linda, how they went to the movies together, and how his awkward nine-year-old self had attempted to nervously flirt with the young girl. By the end of this anecdote he writes: “The thing about a story is that you dream it as you tell it, hoping that others might then dream along with you, and in this way memory and imagination and language combine to make spirits in the head. There is the illusion of aliveness” (225). By the end of the story O’Brien is talking to Linda in his mind, he asks her what it is like to be dead and she says: “‘Well, right now,’ she said, ‘I’m *not* dead. But when I am, it’s like...I don’t know, I guess it’s like being inside a book that nobody’s reading’” (235). These stories are meant to call upon a spirit of the people present within them, in order to—if only for a moment—bring them back to life. O’Brien writes about Kiowa, Norman Bowker, Curt Lemon, and all the others, in order to briefly bring them back from the dead.

This quality of stories, the ability to shape an image in our minds lies at the heart of what O’Brien tries to accomplish with *The Things They Carried*. He does not want to represent history as it happened, because the happening-truth does not tell the right story.

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

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

What stories can do, I guess, is make things present. (179)

The problem with historiography is that it is less equipped to create lasting, symbolic images that emotionally engage the reader. O'Brien uses fiction in his stories to fill in the blanks—blank names, blank faces, blank pasts, presents, and futures—in the hopes of engaging the reader. He writes characters before he writes stories, and therein lays the truth of his work. It is not about the events, it is about the small interactions that surround the events, and those make it real. In “How to Tell a True War Story” O'Brien tells the story of Curt Lemon and Rat Kiley, how one day they were walking around a tree and Curt stepped on a trapped 105 round and was blown to pieces. It is not the fact that Curt was blown up that matters, what matters is “Dave Jensen singing ‘Lemon Tree’ as [they] threw down the parts” (79).

O'Brien embraces fiction in order to bring life to the memories that keep him awake at night, to share these stories with others and help them understand what it is like to live with these ghosts of war. It is impossible for O'Brien to tell the true story—the way it actually happened—and still accomplish what he set out to do with *The Things They Carried*; to make these stories real, to make them truer than the truth, he needed to lie. Modern war stories almost always embrace fiction, but not necessarily in the same way. In the next chapter I will be looking at a veteran author from the other side of the Vietnam War, Bao Ninh. His novel *The Sorrow of War* also fictionalizes certain elements of the war, but he employs these fictional elements differently.

The Sorrow of War

“The diamond-shaped grass clearing was piled high with bodies killed by helicopter gunships. Broken bodies, bodies blown apart, bodies vaporised. No jungle grew again in this clearing. No grass. No plants.”

Bao Ninh, 3

The Sorrow of War starts with the main character, Kien, arriving in the Jungle of Screaming Souls, an area destroyed during large scale battle. He is a part of the Missing in Action body-collecting team, a team dedicated to finding and returning the bodies of soldiers that have gone missing during the war. Kien is familiar with the area; he spent some time there in 1969 with his Battalion 27. The five-hundred members of this battalion were “almost totally wiped out,” only ten of the men survived the slaughter, Kien being one of these ‘lucky’ few.

After that battle no one mentioned Battalion 27 any more, though numerous souls of ghosts and devils were born in that deadly defeat. They were still loose, wandering in every corner and bush in the jungle, drifting along the stream, refusing to depart for the Other World. (3)

While there Kien finds himself remembering his fellow soldiers. He reminisces about spending time with them during the war, how they played cards and smoked Rosa Canina in order to make themselves feel better. It is within these first few pages of the book that the reader learns to understand the manner in which the story of Kien is going to be told. The narrative bleeds from descriptions of landscapes into daytime reverie into war-time anecdote back into environmental description, and so on. The pacing of the writing is snappy; it hardly ever gives the reader any time to *really* think about what is happening. This feeling is emphasized by the lack of chapter divisions in the novel, there are no clear beginnings or endings to the stories that are told, and they all bleed into each other. It feels like the stream of consciousness of a veteran, pouring out his thoughts directly onto a page, piecing them together as he goes. Ninh’s erratic form of narrative fits the thought patterns of a soldier like

Kien whose mind—often without warning—travels back and forth in time between memories and the now.

Often in the middle of a busy street, in broad daylight, I've suddenly become lost in a daydream. On smelling the stink of rotten meat I've suddenly imagined I was back crossing Hamburger Hill in 1972, walking over strewn corpses. The stench of death is often so overpowering I have to stop in the middle of the pavement, holding my nose, while startled, suspicious people step around me, avoiding my mad stare. (43)

Much like Billy Pilgrim in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*, it seems that Kien has come unstuck in time; his trauma pushes him back into the past at the most inopportune moments. In her article "The Narrative Shape of Traumatic Experience" Jane Robinett states that "[*The Sorrow of War* makes] clear that traumatic experience may indeed be not only accessible to the survivor, but expressible linguistically" (306). Bao Ninh in *The Sorrow of War* attempts to reconstruct the post-traumatic experience through narrative, and he embraces the surreal as an important aspect of this reconstruction.

Fiction in *The Sorrow of War*, much like in O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* is a means to an end. For Ninh, too, it seems impossible to truly express the experiences of these soldiers without going into surreal and imagined territories. *The Sorrow of War* is part of the same veteran-writer tradition that *The Things They Carried* belongs to. Bao Ninh, a veteran of the same war but situated on the other side of the conflict, too, felt the need to share his experiences with others. Unlike O'Brien, Ninh does not call direct attention to the fabricated nature of his stories. He uses many obviously fictional and supernatural elements as well as an elaborate frame narrative to show that not all elements within these stories are close to the truth. Throughout the book there are mentions of ghosts, devils, spirits, and more, and if we

are to believe Ninh the Vietnamese countryside has been littered with the supernatural ever since the war. “This is the Jungle of Screaming Souls. It looks empty and innocent, but in fact it’s crowded. There are so many ghosts and devils all over the battleground!” (38). These spirits are a part of the narrative, at no point within the story is attention called to the presence of these beings or is their presence explained. These ghosts seem to be a natural part of the history that Kien is writing about, they are just as important to these stories of the war as the survivors are, they are “of the same ontological order” (White, 19). As mentioned before, the Vietnam War is an example of what Hayden White calls a modernist event. The idea of ‘historical events’ has changed radically since the advent of the modern age “as a result of both the occurrence in our century of events of a scope, scale, and depth unimaginable by earlier historians and the dismantling of the concept of the event as an object of a specifically scientific kind of knowledge” (22). Ninh moves beyond the concept of the Vietnam War as an object of a specifically scientific kind of knowledge by incorporating the spirits of fallen soldiers into his narrative. These spirits have no scientific basis, there is no factual truth to their existence, but these kinds of elements are important, in his view, in giving a clear picture of an event like the Vietnam War. Modernist events cannot adequately be understood by factual means, the massive scope of these events and the damage they have wrought is irreconcilable with standard historiographic practice. The incorporation of fictional and supernatural elements is thus necessary to help the reader understand the true nature of these events.

These obviously fictional elements such as ghosts are not the only way in which Ninh calls attention to the constructed nature of his narrative. Like O’Brien, Ninh also focusses on the writing process itself. Close to the halfway mark of the book Kien is subjected to a particularly lifelike flashback of his battle in the Jungle of Screaming Souls, “bewildered, confused, deeply troubled, he began to pace around the room away from the window. The

memories flared up, again and again. He lurched over to his desk and picked up his pen then almost mechanically began to write” (82). Several times within the novel Kien writes about his need to write, his need to express himself. At one time he is so desperate for inspiration he imagines an anecdote, a story of an interaction between a rich man and a beggar, “I’ll use this scene,” Kien said to himself. ‘I’ll have the rich man and the beggar as former schoolmates.’ Later he decided it was a foolish idea. A fictional replacement for his true stories” (143). With this anecdote Ninh shows that there is the possibility of constructed elements within Kien’s writing, especially if you consider that this ‘fictional replacement’ features no ghosts or spirits, but his ‘true’ stories do. Kien is obviously an unreliable narrator, he is a soldier suffering from post-traumatic stress, who regularly falls into reminiscence of past events, but still he differentiates between these made-up stories and his ‘real’ stories. Ninh, like O’Brien, adheres to Hutcheon’s idea of metafiction; he creates within the reader this “double awareness of both fictiveness and a basis in the ‘real’” (Hutcheon, 107). Bao Ninh installs the line between fiction and history—or truth—by calling attention to the constructed nature of the histories within his book, and then blurs this line by saying that these stories are true; in this sense *The Sorrow of War*, too, is historiographic metafiction.

Bao Ninh, within *The Sorrow of War* focusses on the process of writing the novel, but unlike with *The Things They Carried*, the narrator does not have the same name as the author. Kien, the protagonist of the book is also the one who writes the story. In the final part of the book, we find out that Kien spent the last few days of writing together with a deaf-mute girl who came to occupy a neighbouring apartment. After finishing his manuscript he left it with her, and moved out of the building, never to be seen again. She in turn handed over the manuscript to another person, someone we only get to know as the first person narrator, and who is not named. “Later, by chance, I got the entire manuscript from her. I don’t know why I should have believed her silent demand that I should patiently and carefully read

everything, paragraph after paragraph. Certainly, I started. Just out of curiosity you understand” (222-223). The narrator attempts to edit the work, rearrange it chronologically, but fails: “There was no chronological order at all. Any page seemed like the first, any page could have been the last” (223). Ninh himself here calls attention to the erratic nature of the story through an embedded narrator. This framing device of the “found manuscript” has a long history, especially within Gothic literature like Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* or Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*. This device is often used to increase the distance between the experience of the embedded author and the reader, but at the same time it increases the sense of authenticity. Gothic literature often featured supernatural elements, so an embedded narrator was a useful trope in getting the reader to suspend their disbelief. In *The Sorrow of War* supernatural elements also play a large role, and so the embedded narrative also serves to make Kien’s stories more convincing. Oftentimes the embedded narrator trope is also used to allow the one that found the manuscript some agency in framing the narrative. In “Frame Narratives and the Gothic Subject” Daniel Southward writes: “As a device, the frame narrative reveals much about the Gothic storyteller. By this, I refer to those characters who claim a manuscript, who frame a tale, in order to allay their own anxieties by exerting a power over the truth and a control over those represented within” (7). This too is the case in *The Sorrow of War*, the narrator at the end of the book attempts to create a new frame for the manuscript that he found:

His spirit had not been eroded by a cloudy memory. He could feel happy that his soul would find solace in the fountain of sentiments from his youth. He returned time and time again to his love, his friendship, his comradeship, those human bonds which had all helped us overcome the thousand sufferings of the war.

I envied his inspiration, his optimism in focussing back to the painful glory days. They were caring days, when we knew what we were living and fighting for and why we needed to suffer and sacrifice.

Those were the days when all of us were young, very pure and very sincere.

(226-227)

But this frame does not accurately reflect what we find in Kien's words. Kien does not seem happy when reminiscing about his love and friendship; he seems hurt for having lost them. Kien did not write to remember those "happy" days gone, he wrote because he felt the need to write, and it did not matter how coherent the structure of his stories or how believable his experiences. "All I knew was that the author had written because he had to write," the narrator states, "not because he had to publish. He had to think on paper" (224). This is emphasized by the fact that Kien handed over his manuscript to a deaf-mute woman, someone who would not likely be able to share it with anyone else. Herein lies the reasoning behind Bao Ninh's narrative, it is not necessarily about sharing his experiences; it is about putting these experiences behind him.

Somewhere around the halfway point of the novel Kien tells an anecdote about some of the MIA team members swearing they heard dead soldiers playing musical instruments while out in the jungle.

A nameless song with ghostly rhythm, simple and mysterious, that everyone heard, yet each said they'd heard different versions. They said they listened to it every night and were finally able to follow the voice trail to where the singer was buried. They found a body wrapped in canvas in a shallow grave, its bones crumbled. Alongside the bones lay a hand-made guitar, intact.

True or not? Who's to know. But the story went on to say that when the bones were lifted to be placed in a grave all those present heard the song again echoing through the forest. After the burial the song ended, and was never heard again. (86-87)

This anecdote stuck with me throughout my reading of the novel, it seemed to me a perfect metaphor for what Kien—and by extension Ninh—was doing with his stories. Every anecdote about a soldier was a eulogy, an attempt at putting the memory of this person to rest. Unlike O'Brien, Ninh does not tell his stories to help him remember, he tells them to help him forget. Up until that vivid memory that sparked his obsession with writing, Kien had attempted to repress these memories of the war; he had attempted to live parallel to them, taking their constant intrusions into his life as a part of his daily post-war life. When he started to write he felt that a load was lifted from his shoulders, and when he had finally finished his work—when he had worked through all his memories of the war—he did not know what to do with the finished product. “Now that he had written it, he had no use for it. Whatever devils he had needed to rid himself of had gone. The novel was the ash from this exorcism of devils” (109). It is for this reason that many of the characters in the book are introduced and then almost immediately “killed off”, never to be heard from again. Kien's many fellow soldiers—all those that had died while he had lived—, their ghosts haunted him, so he gave them a proper burial within the pages of his manuscript; and finally their song ended.

All aspects of the novel serve the purpose of moving past the trauma of war. Kien joins the Missing in Action body collecting team, who remove the leftover corpses from the former battlegrounds; they help clear these places of all of the signs that showed there was once a battle. Some are impossible to erase of course, like the diamond shaped clearing where the bodies had been piled up—the one where nothing would grow—, but they are making an

attempt to help even the land itself move forward. Kien leaves his manuscript behind, because it has served its purpose, it is found and published by someone else, someone seemingly unrelated to Kien, because the story is no longer Kien's; his demons are exorcised. Bao Ninh removed his memories of war from himself by making them the memories of a fictional character. His memories of being one of the ten survivors of the slaughter of Youth Brigade Battalion 27 became Kien's memories; in this way Ninh was able to remove his trauma from himself, or move beyond it.

Though both Tim O'Brien and Bao Ninh employ fictional elements to tell of their experiences during the Vietnam War, they do this in different ways and to different ends. O'Brien attempts to resurrect the memory of his fallen allies, and give the faceless masses that occupy his mind a face. Ninh on the other hand employs these fictional elements in order to move past the memories of war, to process them. Both authors write in response to their experienced trauma of the Vietnam War, but it seems that this trauma has manifested itself differently in both authors.

Conclusion

“‘A book?’ I said.
 ‘An old one. It’s up on the library shelf, so you’re safe and everything, but the book hasn’t been checked out for a long, long time. All you can do is wait. Just hope somebody’ll pick it up and start reading.’”

Tim O’Brien, 235

At the heart of these two works lies the question of representation; how do you accurately represent an event like the Vietnam War? The answer to this question is not singular, and it is not an easy one. Hayden White theorised that a “modernist event” like the Vietnam War does not often allow itself to be represented through traditional means of historiography. The scope and scale of the suffering that was caused by a war such as this one cannot accurately be represented with a “specifically scientific kind of knowledge” (White, 22). It is precisely for this reason that both Tim O’Brien and Bao Ninh decided to incorporate fictional elements in their novels on their experiences during the war. It is also for this reason that both authors used the technique of historiographic metafiction to tell their stories. O’Brien in *The Things They Carried* draws attention to these fictional elements, highlighting the constructed nature of his stories. Through this employment of metafiction O’Brien shows the reader how these fictional elements are necessary to tell a true war story, how it is impossible to represent something like the Vietnam War with anything other than the “story-truth”. In the chapter titled “How to Tell a True War Story” O’Brien tackles the matter of representation, he writes:

In any war story, but especially a true one, it’s difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen. What seems to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way. The angles of vision are skewed. [...] The pictures get jumbled; you tend to miss a lot. And then afterward, when you go to tell about it, there is always that surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it *seemed*. (69-70)

According to O'Brien the personal aspect of a story is just as important to the accurate representation of a war story as the factual aspects are. Like White, O'Brien feels that it is not possible to accurately represent the truth while leaving out the "seemingly" of these events.

Bao Ninh, unlike O'Brien, does not directly call attention to the constructed nature of his stories in *The Sorrow of War*. Instead, he opts to make clear that this narrative is constructed by making it a framed narrative, a found manuscript. This means that the reader becomes aware of the constructed nature of the story because even within the boundaries of the text it is constructed. To detract even more from the credibility of the stories, the embedded writer, Kien, is put forth as an unreliable narrator plagued by incredibly vivid flashbacks of the war. Still Kien insists his stories are true—"his true stories"—but this insistence is problematized by the incorporation of surreal, even supernatural elements in his narrative (143). Ghosts are an important part of Kien's stories, these apparitions help connect the people and their land to the war; these ghosts help Bao Ninh to illustrate the sense of loss that is imbued within Vietnam. Their constant presence serves as a reminder that the war, even after years have passed, is still close to the heart of the Vietnamese people. Ninh, like O'Brien and White, feels that these fictional and surreal, even supernatural, elements are necessary to accurately represent the Vietnam War.

O'Brien, too, at times incorporates the supernatural into his stories, like in the story "Night Life", where Rat Kiley's experiences during the war become too much for the boy and his trauma starts to take the shape of hallucinations during the night time.

'Anyway,' Rat said, 'the days aren't so bad, but at night the pictures get to be a bitch. I start seeing my own body. Chunks of myself. My own heart, my own kidneys. It's like – I don't know – it's like staring into this huge black crystal ball. One of these nights I'll be lying dead out there in the dark

and nobody'll find me except the bugs – I can *see* it – I can see the
 goddamn bugs chewing tunnels through me – I can see the mongooses
 munching on my bones. I swear, it's too much. I can't keep seeing myself
 dead.' (217-218)

The ghosts in *The Things They Carried* are not presented in such a matter of fact fashion as they are in *The Sorrow of War*. These ghosts are represented as figments of the soldier's imagination, a manifestation of the "seemingness" of their experiences during the war.

The representation of the Vietnam War within *The Things They Carried* and *The Sorrow of War* is on the one hand very similar, both works incorporate fictional elements, and both authors use the technique of historiographic metafiction to tell their stories. But O'Brien chooses to use a more self-referential style of writing, and he is also more focussed on the soldier's experience of the war, while Ninh chooses to tell his stories through a frame narrative, electing to portray the war through a jumble of stories, written down like a veteran's stream-of-consciousness. I feel that these differences in writing styles are not only a product of their experiences during the war, but also of what happened after. These works were obviously not written in a vacuum; it seems to me that both O'Brien and Ninh were heavily influenced by their geopolitical position. O'Brien came home after the war to a country unwilling to talk about the war, Ninh after his service remained in a country unable to forget. O'Brien's ghosts live only within his soldier's minds, but Ninh's ghosts are a part of the country; living with the ghosts of the war is a natural part of the post-war lives of the Vietnamese. "I've been driving for this corpse-collecting team since early '73 but I still can't get used to the passengers who come out of their graves to talk to me. Not a night goes by without them waking me for a chat" (38). When you look at their novels within this context it makes sense that O'Brien's writing became a form of remembrance, and Ninh's writing an attempt at forgetting, because their respective countries struggled with these specific aspects.

In the introduction to my thesis I asked the question: In what way do O'Brien and Ninh employ fictional elements in retelling the traumatic experience of the Vietnam War? In the two chapters that followed I showed that both O'Brien and Ninh use fictional elements to more accurately represent the Vietnam War as they experienced it. O'Brien also employs fiction as a way to make sense of his memories of the war, he uses it to "attach faces to grief and love" (179-180). Perhaps one could see these stories as memorials of individual comrades and friends, an epitaph for the fallen members of his squad. O'Brien most likely feels that these sorts of memorials are necessary, especially in a society that is actively trying to forget. Ninh on the other hand uses these fictional elements to process his trauma, he attempts to move past the constant relapses to his memories of the war by writing them down. Writing to Ninh is a form of therapy, this becomes clear through the cathartic effect that writing seems to have on Kien in *The Sorrow of War*. He no longer wants to remember, and transfers this duty of remembering to his readers, freeing himself from this burden; just like Kien he leaves his written memories with someone else. Though these two ends seem to be entirely different, the overarching goal is the same: to move past their respective traumas of the War, for O'Brien the inability to remember, and for Ninh the impossibility of forgetting.

I suggest looking at Tim O'Brien's other work through this frame of remembrance. It could be interesting to find out whether the larger gap between the Vietnam War and publishing of *The Things They Carried* perhaps changed his view on how he had to deal with his memories of the war. I would also suggest looking at *Trại bảy chú lùn* (Camp of Seven Dwarves), a short story collection on the Vietnam War written by Bao Ninh in 1987, before he wrote *The Sorrow of War*. Perhaps Ninh's vision on the War also changed in those three years between the publication of this collection of short stories and writing *The Sorrow of War*. For further research I would like to use the same framework that I set up in my thesis to do a comparison between, two novels on the Iraq War: Phil Klay's *Redeployment*—a

collection of short stories obviously influenced by Tim O'Brien's writing—and Hassan Blasim's *The Corpse Exhibition and Other Stories of Iraq*—a short story collection written from an Iraqi perspective.

In today's unstable political climate it seems to me important to look at novels like *The Things They Carried* and *The Sorrow of War* in order to both remind ourselves of what it is that war does to people, but also that there are two sides to the same coin. Those that serve on the opposite side are also humans, and they have their own reasons for fighting. I am reminded of the idiom: "Before you judge a man, walk a mile in his shoes." It seems to me that these days it is difficult for people to empathise with others, especially if they perceive these people to be different, or—God forbid—evil. I feel it is important to remain open to new information that might change your opinion on matters such as these, listen to people from both sides of the conflict—read books from both sides of a conflict—lest we find ourselves in another war with the promise of the pain of remembrance and the struggle of forgetting.

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