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**Tim O'Brien and American National Identity:
A Vietnam Veteran's Imagined Self in The Things They Carried**

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In this paper I shall be examining Tim O'Brien's treatment of both the national and the personal American self in his collection of Vietnam War stories *The Things They Carried*. I will look at some of the ways in which O'Brien renders frail that veneer of authenticity traditionally associated with autobiographical first-person fiction. I will consider how O'Brien manipulates the reader's customary 'suspension of disbelief' by giving the narrator of *The Things They Carried* his own name and many of his own biographical details (date of birth, military record, and so on), while simultaneously stressing, throughout the narrative, that all the characters (including the narrator) are fictional and all the stories (including those in which the narrator takes part) are invented. It could be said that, in *The Things They Carried*, everything is true but nothing is authentic.

This dichotomy is not merely an academic conceit. O'Brien himself has repeatedly made two statements, throughout the text of *The Things They Carried* and in interview since the book's publication: 'This is a true story' and 'Everything is made up.' In writing specifically about war, O'Brien says, 'To generalize about war is like generalizing about peace. Almost everything is true. Almost nothing is true.'¹ O'Brien thus effectively hampers any significant effort on the part of the reader to distinguish between fact and fiction, reality and imagination in this book. Most apposite to this paper, he hampers any attempts to distinguish between his 'real' self (the author Tim O'Brien) and his fictitious self (the narrator Tim O'Brien - the book's 'I' character). The two personae often give the appearance of becoming intertwined and almost indistinguishable, even in the author's mind. O'Brien's narrator says in *The Things They Carried*, 'It's not the surface that matters, it's the identity that lives inside' and this does seem to indicate that the 'real' identity of the narrator may not always be as clear-cut as it seems.

Having conducted discussions of the book with a wide range of O'Brien's readers², I have noted that some certainly do experience immense difficulty when trying to get to grips with the slippery nature of the so-called 'authenticity' (one might also say 'inauthenticity') of O'Brien's writing. And, of all the devices he uses to blur the boundaries between truth and fiction, it is the identity of this book's narrator which seems to present the most testing difficulties for most readers. It is essential, then, in any commentary on this book's 'made up true stories', to make clear distinctions between Tim O'Brien the fictitious narrator and Tim O'Brien the real, living author. In order to achieve clarity in this respect, I will refer to the former as 'the I-narrator' and to the latter simply as 'Tim O'Brien' or 'O'Brien'.

Tim O'Brien is a twentieth-century author, still living and writing. He was born in 1946, in a small town in Minnesota, part of America's rural Midwest. After graduating from Worthington College, Minnesota in the summer of 1968, he received his draft papers for Vietnam. From February 1969 to March 1970 he served as a foot soldier (a 'grunt' in

common US Army slang) in the 5th Battalion of the 46th Infantry, Americal Division. He achieved the rank of sergeant and received the Purple Heart after sustaining a grenade wound. He is known primarily as a Vietnam War novelist.

The I-narrator of *The Things They Carried* shares these, and other, biographical details with Tim O'Brien, including his name. Clearly, then, in this book Tim O'Brien is presenting, to an extent, a view of himself. Nevertheless, we must return to those repeated statements O'Brien has made, that all the apparently 'autobiographical' stories he relates are pure fiction, and that the I-narrator is merely another player in the book's cast of characters. We may or may not believe what the author says about himself and his work - and, of course, authorial intent presents a treacherous minefield through which many critics would prefer not to walk. However, it is clear from the inclusion of so many verifiable facts about his own life that Tim O'Brien is portraying, in his fictional 'I', a very particularised, re-worked version of his own self.

My contention here is, therefore, that the I-narrator is Tim O'Brien's own imaginary self, a re-invented self who can say, convincingly, 'I've told it before - many times, many versions - but here's what actually happened,' without losing either authorial or fictional credibility. Although he is a fictional component of a fictional work, the I-narrator is nevertheless a very real a part of the personality of Tim O'Brien, who emerges and lives for a short while for the purposes of narrating and linking the book's stories. The I-narrator is not wholly real, but neither is he wholly invented. Similarly, according to O'Brien, the wide range of stories the I-narrator tells never actually happened; the people he names in his narrative do not, he says, exist³ - although there is evidence to suggest that some are based upon real people. In the disparate, but connecting, selection of stories which make up *The Things They Carried*, everything about Tim O'Brien's personal experience of Vietnam seems re-shaped and re-worked until the book effectively becomes an ideograph of the representative American Vietnam War experience.

However, O'Brien's writing methods cannot properly be pigeonholed as easily as that. It is also my suggestion that, in presenting an I-narrator called Tim O'Brien in *The Things They Carried*, the author Tim O'Brien is carrying the standard of a well-established and ongoing tradition in American literature - the tradition of reinventing the self. But, again in the tradition of the most effective American writers, O'Brien achieves his re-inventions in slightly different ways from the ways the reader has become used to. He challenges the old familiar expectations of what a narrator really is and what we can expect of him, and that is one reason why so many readers experience such difficulty and frustration when trying to make sense of this novel.

In a sense, of course, O'Brien is doing nothing new. It is quite usual for fictitious characters in American literature to reinvent themselves - or to be reinvented or re-shaped or otherwise changed by circumstance. It is to be expected that fictitious characters will progress and evolve through the course of a book, emerging at the end as different characters, for good or ill. What Tim O'Brien does somewhat differently, I suggest, is to reinvent and re-present his own self by fictitious means, without allowing the nature or circumstances of the fictitious self to change as the book progresses. In other words, the I-narrator stays the same throughout the book. Only Tim O'Brien - the real author - is changed by the book's stories, because the real man is imagined and re-worked into a fictional character (who nevertheless still appears real). This is a complicated notion to grasp. To explain what I mean, it is necessary to jump back a little in America's cultural timescale.

The impulse to regenerate and re-create both one's own individual self and the collective national self is recognisably part of a long, ongoing American tradition. At the same time, the act of re-creating and re-shaping reality into a kind of fictionalised autotype is both a socio-cultural tradition in America and, by extension (since art and social culture are of course interactive), also part of an ongoing literary tradition, from the earliest European settlement of the American continent in the seventeenth century to the present day. This is of course an old familiar idea for American Studies specialists.

In the seventeenth century, the very notion of a 'New World' was exactly that - a new pattern would be inscribed, as it were, on a tabula rasa. It would be an original picture conceived, composed and constructed upon a blank canvas. The American colonies (and later the nation) would represent a true renaissance; everything would, literally, be new. One of the cornerstones of American ideals has been the notion that one can leave one's past behind and forge a new present - and, most importantly, a new future. Each new American citizen (indeed, each new 'America' in all its incarnations from colonialisation to globalisation) can occupy a central position as a 'reborn' entity living out a freshly-reconstructed life. Somewhat paradoxically, America's roots were planted in an early impulse to move: specifically, to move away from European cultural influences and European ideals, creating instead something totally different and peculiarly American. A manufactured nation would thus eventually be forged very deliberately (albeit tortuously) from an ideology which advocated personal and national independence and individuality. And that independence and individuality would be achievable through a perpetual process of personal and national self-definition and re-definition (and re-definition and re-definition . . . however many re-definitions it would take to reach each individual's ultimate goal).

A fundamental, defining myth of 'the American way' - a myth accepted across the world as well as by Americans themselves - is that, in America more than in any other place on earth, anyone can be and do anything. Anyone can achieve any position, any status. Anyone can be President, anyone can make a million, anyone can set up a religion. Success is perceived as resting largely upon the ability to redefine one's own personal self - the ability to imagine oneself into a different form - and then to use the new self in order to pursue one's own personal goal. What you were before doesn't matter. What you are now doesn't particularly matter. What matters is what you will eventually turn yourself into.

This mythic self-regeneration has been a recognised part of the American cultural creed throughout the nation's development. For example, the eighteenth-century French commentator, J. Hector StJohn de Crevecoeur was a European opposed to the notion of America's independence. Nevertheless, Crevecoeur recognised that Americans were 'new men who act upon new principles, ideas and opinions'. That idealised image of the independent-minded American, who pursues a constant forward-moving journey of self-recreation, has persisted as a thread through the whole history of American literature. There are countless examples of a continuing American literary tradition of self re-definition: Horatio Alger's *Ragged Dick*, Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, Mark Twain's *Huck Finn*, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Jay Gatsby*, and so forth. In a cultural ideology which fetes the 'new man', literary examples of the 'character make-over' are too numerous to list. What is important is the underlying shared belief among these characters that the self must undergo a crucial alteration during the course of the text, with a greater or lesser degree of success. In fact, success is hardly the point; the whole idea is to effect some kind of change - any kind of change - for good or ill. In material terms, in terms of

social status, in terms of 'rising up' (or 'sinking down') socially and culturally, the basic requirement of the American story is that nobody should stay the same.

All through the development of the American nation and its varying cultural compounds, then, new interpretations of the self have continually taken place, with fiction consistently mirroring reality (and often, we could claim in post-modern times, vice versa). Beginning with a break away from the old British culture, and continuing with the quest to forge a new social, political and cultural order in which 'I' will be a shining example to the rest of the world, the original Puritan ideals (where the self is 'born' and not 'made') gave way quickly to the enduring American ideal that any individual can make of her/himself whatever she/he chooses, through work, talent and/or determination. In other words, at the heart of the American ideal lies the will to be today something 'other' than whatever one happened to be yesterday.

In the interests of brevity, and of staying on topic, I must now make a leap across the centuries and return to the subject of how Tim O'Brien's re-shaping of the self represents a very twentieth-century phenomenon - the tendency to display but at the same time to distort the author's self-image through fictitious means.

I suggested earlier that in American literature the changed self has largely been seen to improve throughout the story - often in material and practical terms, but also in social, cultural and ethical terms. The fictional American self usually ends up a better person at the end of the book than he or she was at the beginning. Occasionally, however, the central character deteriorates in some way, through loss of sanity, status or wealth, for example. In the case of the I-narrator of *The Things They Carried*, it is my belief that the self is neither improved nor degraded; over the course of twenty-two chapters, he is not changed in any greatly significant way. Tim O'Brien presents his I-narrator, at the start of *The Things They Carried*, as being full of self-doubt, haunted by images of his own and his country's moral inconsistency and tortured by dilemmas about whether it is possible to do right during a 'wrong' war. Even by the time we reach the final page of the book, none of this has changed. The I-narrator achieves neither salvation nor nemesis.

O'Brien's book is full of personal and national images of an American self which simply cannot behave in an altogether ethical way. Each of the characters has his (or her) own way of dealing with Vietnam. For example, one of the 'grunts', Norman Bowker, carries a thumb, taken from a dead Viet Cong boy, which has been presented to him as a gift by another grunt, Mitchell Sanders⁴. Should Bowker reject a gift from a buddy, or should he honour the gift and carry a dead man's thumb around with him? There is no 'right' answer. Another character who can find no satisfactory answers is Lieutenant Jimmy Cross, who spends much of his time in Vietnam obsessing about his girlfriend, Martha, back home in America. After the death of one of his men, which Cross blames on his own poor leadership, Cross decides to forget Martha and 'comport himself as an officer'. The 'rightness' of this decision is challenged by the fact that, despite Cross's