

**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'.<sup>1</sup> 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 readers <sup>2</sup>, 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 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, exist <sup>3</sup> - 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 Sanders <sup>4</sup>. 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 'obligation to lead', his men continue to die in combat. His decision may have been ethically right but it is ineffectual. There are many other examples through the narrative of this book where a character is quite unable to make a correct moral or ethical decision. The most striking is contained, as we would expect, in the I-narrator's personal story, 'On the Rainy River'. Having just received his draft papers, he flees to a remote part of Minnesota where he has to decide whether or not to slip across the border into Canada to escape an enforced tour of war duty. Should he run to Canada, or should he go to Vietnam and fight? The decision is impossible: A moral freeze: I couldn't decide, I couldn't act, I couldn't comport myself with even a pretense of modest human dignity.' Even after his decision is made (to turn back from Canada, to go to Vietnam and fight for his country), he knows he has not been able to make a pure, faultless decision: 'I passed through towns with familiar names, through the pine forests and down to the prairie, and then to Vietnam, where I was a soldier, and then home again. I survived, but it's not a happy ending. I was a coward. I went to the war.' <sup>5</sup>

In *The Things They Carried* Tim O'Brien constantly returns to this same dilemma: is it right for a good American to help fight a war when his country tells him to, despite his belief that the war is wrong, or is the correct decision instead to refuse to fight, despite his love and respect for his country? The I-narrator has no clear-cut answers at the start of the book, nor at the end. Unlike so many of his literary predecessors, as the book closes, the I-narrator remains unenlightened about the meaninglessness of war and death. In the book's final story, 'The lives of the dead', O'Brien interweaves two stories, one recounting the death of a childhood friend, the other addressing, yet again, the deaths he witnessed in Vietnam. There is no explanation, no enlightenment, no final exegesis upon which to hang the 'moral' of his book, except the statement that, with a story, 'I can revive, at least briefly, that which is absolute and unchanging.'

This notion may seem like a positive ending. All these people have died, for no good reason that we can see, but the author is performing the admirable trick of raising them from the dead to allow them to exist once more, before our very eyes. However, the images are simply that - mere images, with no more substance than a wavering mirage in a desert. Moreover, O'Brien underlines his refusal to give concrete answers by never letting us forget that these are fictional images, not factual ones. His final story implies that, certainly, the author can perform the wonderful miracle of resurrecting the dead, yet there is no suggestion that these dead people ever actually lived. They are not reincarnations of deceased people; they are, as he puts it on the final page, 'like the man who never was'.<sup>6</sup>

There is no comfort for the reader in the fact that the dead of this book 'never were'. O'Brien denies his readers the reassurance contained in the usual knowledge that, in a novel, all is fiction after all. He refuses to make any of the standard literary implications about war: that is, war is hell but we can leave it when we close the book and return to real life. In the seventh chapter, 'How to tell a true war story', O'Brien tells us unequivocally that, in war, there is no rectitude, no moral explanation of what seems like, and often is, pointless death:

Often in a true war story there is not even a point, or else the point doesn't hit you until twenty years later, in your sleep, and you wake up and shake your wife and start telling the story to her, except when you get to the end you've forgotten the point again. And then for a long time you lie there watching the story happen in your head. You listen to your wife's breathing. The war's over. You close your eyes. You smile and think, Christ, what's the point?

The impulse of much post-Vietnam thinking has sprung from a belief that America's decision to involve itself in the Vietnam War was a tragic, pointless error of judgement. Consistently, through the latter part of the twentieth century - even while the Vietnam War was still being fought - that war has been depicted as a misguided, even an immoral venture. All of Tim O'Brien's books, whether or not they are placed categorically inside a Vietnam War setting, are examples of how this thinking finds a literary outlet. In this respect, *The Things They Carried*, rather than being a misleading hotchpotch of truth and lies, can be seen to represent a clearly articulated argument against drawing final conclusions about the moralities of war.

In creating his I-narrator, O'Brien has shown how a re-invented, imagined personal self can be utilised in order to encourage a wider re-examination of the nation's sense of self. Tim O'Brien quite intentionally gives no answers. As he said to Martin Napersteck in 1991:

The best literature is always explorative. It's searching for answers and never finding them. It's almost like Platonic dialogue . . . Fiction is a way of testing possibilities and testing hypotheses, and not defining.<sup>7</sup>

Clearly, the act of questioning alone is adequate to the purpose of the book. By the end of *The Things They Carried*, the I-narrator is still addressing the same questions which concerned him at the start. He's still full of self-doubt, still haunted by images of his own and his country's moral inconsistency, still tortured by dilemmas about whether it is possible to do right in a 'wrong' situation. The I-narrator remains essentially unchanged, just as the world in general remains essentially unchanged by war (because surely, O'Brien implies, if war had the power to change people, then surely there would be no more wars).

The I-narrator in *The Things They Carried* represents, then, a very particularised, personal example of a re-invented self in late twentieth-century American fiction writing. That is to say:

- a) He clearly represents at least some facets of the author himself, even though the author may sometimes appear at pains to try to convince us otherwise.
- b) He does not change significantly throughout the book, even though, as a character, he does represent a change in the author's self-image.
- c) He represents one of the more negative - and, to Americans, perhaps less palatable - sides of the American collective identity; that is to say, he was a foot soldier fighting the only war the American nation has ever seemed to 'lose'.

Tim O'Brien connects his own imagined, re-invented self with a more generalised, collective American self. The way he does this is to present a series of stories, written in the form of a seemingly real Vietnam veteran's memories, while also addressing the wider hypothetical experiences of other Vietnam veterans. Into these Vietnam-based stories, O'Brien inserts and interweaves a reflective philosophical discourse which concerns itself with the more generalised moral dilemmas presented to all humans by the war experience. He uses a real war as a backdrop to tell stories which may or may not be wholly fictional, interspersing them with philosophical

musings upon the impossibility of truly knowing the ultimate rights and wrongs, both of war and of human interaction in general. The continuous dialogue between all these disparate but interlinking elements produces a kind of literary refraction, allowing O'Brien to light up the many components of his subject-matter from different angles, leading to an interactive exploration of the human condition, by reader as well as writer.

The historical setting of O'Brien's stories serves to heighten the resulting polemical effect of his complicated writing technique. It is almost too obvious to point out, at this stage, that the Vietnam era was a time of immense personal and national conflict in America. To decide either way - to take either a pro- or an anti-war stance - presented most individuals, as well as the nation as a whole, with grave humanitarian and philanthropic problems. For example, many Americans questioned the validity of inserting its military might into another nation's affairs, a nation whose culture was considered by many Americans to be less 'sophisticated' than that of the West.

O'Brien has never been comfortable with the legitimacy of America's having sent its young men to fight the war in Vietnam. In interview and in his non-fiction articles, largely written immediately after his return from Vietnam, he makes no pretence of ever having felt wholehearted support for America's military action in Vietnam. He repeatedly states that he only went to war because he did not have the courage to refuse to go. Nevertheless, his technique of expressing but not explaining the Vietnam experience in his books can be recognised as an attempt to convey his personal experience of war while refusing to use his stories as a vehicle for proselytising about his beliefs. However, as ever in O'Brien's writing, the matter is complicated by the presence of conflicting 'messages' in the text. The I-narrator says in *The Things They Carried*:

A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior, nor restrain men from doing the things men have always done. If a story seems moral, do not believe it. If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie. There is no rectitude whatsoever. There is no virtue. As a first rule of thumb, therefore, you can tell a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil. <sup>8</sup>

This seems to offer something of a contradiction. As I said earlier, O'Brien claims that his intention is neither to represent himself in this book nor to preach his own views and beliefs. For example, in interview with Michael Coffey in 1990, when the stories of *The Things They Carried* first appeared in print as a collection, O'Brien said, 'I wanted to have a book in which my name, Tim, appeared even though Tim would not be me . . . it was something I had to find the guts to do. Similarly, when speaking to John Mort in 1994, O'Brien said:

That's how novels are fun to write, because novels don't have to answer such questions [that is, the question of what constitutes evil: LW]. They have to broaden our sense of what we don't know and the inexplicability of the world sometimes. <sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, some strongly-held personal beliefs are very clearly implied in the above passage from the seventh chapter, 'How to tell a war story'. It is my belief that this is not an accidental inconsistency in O'Brien's writing. Neither is it an adverse reflection upon the verisimilitude of his war stories. It is, rather, a deliberate and systematic blurring of the traditional categorisations which we all work through when reading war literature - whether that literature is autobiographical or purely fictional. When tackling a war novel written by a war veteran, we must constantly ask ourselves: what kind of writing is this, exactly? Is it a mixture of truth and fiction, or of biography and autobiography, or of pure fact, or of completely fabricated invention? The answer, in *The Things They Carried*, is that it is a mixture of all these elements, in varying ratios for each story.

Tim O'Brien is, through his personal-fictional Vietnam War I-narrator, clearly challenging many of the categorisations of self which American writers and their readers have traditionally used in order to make sense of their cultural identities. Again, the reader is left with questions rather than answers. Who is the narrator? Can he be believed? And, ultimately, does it really matter?

In *The Things They Carried*, it is clear that the I-narrator is not a faithful, carbon-copy depiction of Tim O'Brien the human being. However, he is representative of a part of O'Brien's personality, as well as of a wider American self - the self, not only of the American Vietnam War veteran but also of the American civilian. Furthermore, O'Brien, in his very particularised method of writing, combines these various 'selves' to paint an even wider picture of the self which encompasses the very nature of American national identity in the late twentieth century.

This paper has attempted to negotiate a route between some of the refrangible elements of Tim O'Brien's depictions of his own self and the wider American sense of itself as a nation. Thus it seems appropriate to end

with a quotation from his memoir, *If I Die in a Combat Zone*:

I grew out of one war and into another. My father came from leaden ships of sea, from the Pacific theater; my mother wore the uniform of the WAVES. I was the wrinkled, swollen, bloody offspring of the great campaign against the tyrants of the 1940s, one explosion in the Baby Boom, one of millions of new human beings come to replace those who had just died. My bawling came with the first throaty note of a new army in the spawning. I was bred with the haste and dispatch and careless muscle-flexing of a rejuvenated, splendidly triumphant nation giving bridle to its own good fortune and success. I was fed with the spoils of the 1945 victory. I learned to read and write on the prairies of southern Minnesota, in towns peering like corpses' eyeballs from out of the corn . . . My teachers were brittle old ladies, classroom football coaches, flushed veterans of the war, pretty girls in sixth grade, memories of hot-blooded valor . . . One day in May the high school held graduation ceremonies. Then I went away to college, and the town did not miss me much.

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## Endnotes

1. *The Things They Carried*: 77. Throughout this paper I have used the London Flamingo 1991 paperback edition. [\[back\]](#)
2. During the course of my research I have spoken to many different readers of O'Brien's work, including Vietnam veterans, college undergraduates, casual readers and academics. [\[back\]](#)
3. O'Brien's disclaimer at the beginning of *The Things They Carried* states: 'This is a work of fiction. Except for a few details regarding the author's own life, all the incidents, names and characters are imaginary.' See also the many interview responses made by O'Brien to the effect that most of the events described in this book did not happen in fact. [\[back\]](#)
4. *The Things They Carried*: 11. [\[back\]](#)
5. *The Things They Carried*: 51-5. [\[back\]](#)
6. *The Things They Carried*: 236. [\[back\]](#)
7. Martin Napersteck, 'An interview with Tim O'Brien', in *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 32, Spring 1991: 5. [\[back\]](#)
8. *The Things They Carried*: 68. [\[back\]](#)
9. John Mort, 'The *Booklist* interview', in *Booklist*, August 1994: 1990-1. [\[back\]](#)