Making Things Present: Tim O’Brien’s Autobiographical Metafiction

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Beginning with its front matter, Tim O’Brien’s collection of interlinked short narratives *The Things They Carried* (1990) raises fundamental questions about the nature of truth and narrative authority. Published as a “work of fiction,” the book includes a fairly standard disclaimer that “[e]xcept for a few details regarding the author’s own life, all the incidents, names, and characters are imaginary.” Yet the book is also “lovingly dedicated to the men of Alpha Company”—a statement that elevates these imaginary characters to the level of real people worthy of a dedication. Such slippery negotiation of fact and fiction continues with the epigraph, taken from John Ransom’s *Andersonville Diary*, which reads, “[t]hose 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.” Thus even as the copyright page provides a legalistic disclaimer specifying that *The Things They Carried* is a work of imaginative literature rather than a historical document, the front matter encourages “inexperienced” readers to appreciate the text as a “statement of actual things,” as a work of “truth.”

If the epigraph reads like an attempt to authorize the use of fiction in order to write history, O’Brien’s narrator also makes liberal use of history (his story) to develop and organize the fiction. Indeed, despite the collection’s self-consciously fictional status, O’Brien incorporates undeniably autobiographical elements, such as a character named Tim O’Brien who is a writer and a Vietnam vet, a writer, like O’Brien himself, who went to graduate school at Harvard and then published a novel entitled *Going After Cacciato*
and a memoir, *If I Die in a Combat Zone*. In this way, the book calls attention to its apparent basis in reality, reasserting what many readers take to be the central premise, or promise, of mimetic representation, that life will be mirrored in the book. However, this mimetic gesture inevitably frustrates newcomers to O’Brien’s work, for as soon as the narrator declares something to be true, he invariably confesses he made it up, putting history itself in question. Arguably, it is precisely this liminal space—between fiction and nonfiction—that allows the text to do its critical work.

The declaring and undoing of “truth,” as set up in the book’s front matter, rather than the “truthfulness” of O’Brien’s tale, serves as the central impetus of this essay. In other words, 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. This performative gesture—the staging of truth through its very utterance—begins in the creation of a protagonist-narrator who bears the author’s own name. Characterized here as “autobiographical metafiction,” this technique is also adopted by many of O’Brien’s contemporaries—including Carole Maso (*The Art Lover*), John Edgar Wideman (*Philadelphia Fire*), Paul Auster (*City of Glass*), Mark Leyner (*Et Tu, Babe*), and Kathy Acker (*Portrait of an Eye*)—who for diverse reasons and to different ends make use of characters who “are” themselves.

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1. While some critics have used quotation marks or the name “Tim” to differentiate the fictional “Tim O’Brien” and the real Tim O’Brien, I use the name O’Brien—without quotation marks—to refer to both the author and narrator-character. Although this decision continuously risks evoking the intentional fallacy, the conflation of author and character in name seems useful, given the subject of this essay.

2. For discussions of *The Things They Carried* that highlight O’Brien’s metafiction and manipulation of the truth, see in particular Calloway, Herzog, and Volkmer.

3. At first glance, O’Brien’s novel might be read within the context of what Linda Hutcheon eloquently characterizes as “historiographic metafiction.” While I take Hutcheon’s work as instructive and clearly play on this genre in adopting the term “autobiographical metafiction,” I do not believe that discussions of autobiography and personal history are inherent, or highlighted, in the kinds of texts she takes as her prime examples. Arguably, while O’Brien’s text is both autobiographical and historiographic, not all historiographic metafiction relies on, or riffs on, autobiography in the way that O’Brien does. To my mind, a reading of O’Brien’s work as “historiographic” would necessarily foreground its position within the context of historical narratives about Vietnam,
Consequently, while *The Things They Carried* is most frequently discussed as a work of Vietnam literature, in this essay I want to resituate the book in relation to another group of contemporary narratives, as part of a larger conversation about what I take to be an emergent postmodern genre situated at the boundary between autobiography and metafiction. Such classification calls attention to the questions of literary mode raised formally as well as thematically in the text. If, as Fredric Jameson suggests (145), genres operate pragmatically as intellectual “scaffolding” to be put in place to support a particular analysis and then disassembled, my reading of *The Things They Carried* benefits from delineating a generic category that highlights the use of autobiography within the context of an otherwise fictional narrative.

For the purposes of this analysis, the choice to understand the book as autobiographical necessarily calls attention to its relation to the more personal “his-stories” of memoir or autobiographically based fiction, where the issues of ethos, including authorial intent and credibility, are central. Rather than being a distinct trait of O’Brien’s literary style, such an autobiographical gesture speaks to important issues in postmodern literature and theory at a historical moment when the author is both somehow “dead” and also the authorizing agent of his own fiction. In the case of O’Brien, I argue,

4. Alex Vernon’s *Soldiers Once and Still* and Mark A. Heberle’s *A Trauma Artist* offer important analyses of *The Things They Carried* that focus on its treatment of Vietnam and the trauma of war. While I would not downplay the importance of the subject and context of the Vietnam conflict, I want to suggest that there might be a closer affinity than at first appears between O’Brien and other postmodern writers who work at the intersection of personal and cultural trauma. Arguably, O’Brien’s relation to other postmodern writers is one of the most contentious issues in recent criticism on the author, as Lucas Carpenter notes. For another analysis that juxtaposes O’Brien’s work against metafictionists—including Don DeLillo, Gabriel García Márquez, and Robert Coover—see Kaufmann.

5. Mary A. McCay’s “The Autobiography of Guilt” likewise uses the framework of autobiography to discuss O’Brien’s work, arguing that “[i]n this book more than in any other, O’Brien’s writing supports the theory that autobiography is a form of fiction and that fiction frames and focuses the autobiographical impulse” (118). Consequently, McCay views all of O’Brien’s works to be instances of the general category of autobiography. My own concern is less with the nature of autobiography than with the rhetorical force of statements taken to be “autobiographical.”
this technique provides a means of engaging the ethical problems involved in writing about traumatic material, material for which the issue of the “true” or the “real” necessarily remains in question. For this reason, the Tim O’Brien character functions not as an unquestioned appeal to the truth vis-à-vis personal experience, but as a rhetorical or performative strategy. As such, the collection simultaneously acknowledges the epistemological problem of postmodernity—the loss of certain knowledge—and establishes the credibility that more traditional readers, perhaps, desire. After all, the book is written—as the epigraph reminds us—“by one who experienced [the events of Vietnam] to the fullest.”

The goal of this essay, then, is to use the generic category of autobiographical metafiction as a way to work through the instability of truth and the ethics of form in O’Brien’s narrative of Vietnam. Beginning with a discussion of “story-truth” and the nature of the “true war story,” I argue that the book’s self-conscious use of fictionality works to create a sense of presence for the reader, focusing in particular on the use of bodily images and the “things” of Vietnam. Such generous and explicit details function as counternarrative to the generalized “happening-truth” in history books, which vacates the particular violences of Vietnam. However, the willingness of the reader to accept this fictional account as truth hinges less on its biographical and historical reality than on the credibility and suasive force of the narrator, bolstered through the performative staging of autobiography in the development of the Tim O’Brien character. Looking to performances of storytelling surrounding Norman Bowker and the night in the field, I argue that the book’s genre serves an ethical purpose, working to establish culpability through presence and offering a powerful reminder about the status of narrative authority in postmodern fiction. As O’Brien puts it, “A true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe” (78). Ultimately, the use of autobiographical metafiction in *The Things They Carried* works to make a true observation about the complicated nature of truth as it pertains to the personal and historical traumas of Vietnam.

“Good Form,” one of the book’s most frequently discussed metafictional stories, explicitly reflects on the need for fiction as a means of getting at something “true” and making Vietnam “real” to readers. In this two-page short story, the narrator establishes the book’s central distinction between “story-truth” and “happening-truth,”
providing examples of each. If the purpose of story-truth, O’Brien explains, is to allow the reader to “feel what I felt,” it is also paradoxically “truer sometimes than happening-truth” (179). Dramatized here, happening-truth provides the generalized statement of fact—it “tells” rather than “shows”—and does little more than summarize events: “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” (180). In this way, “happening truth” remains historically and emotionally distant. It is impersonal or “faceless.” It is also, arguably, the “facts” of Tim O’Brien’s life. By contrast, story-truth is full of excruciating detail and specificity: “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” (180). If story-truth enables the writer to put a face to his grief—a man with an eye like a star-shaped hole—it likewise makes Vietnam real to the absent reader, who is not allowed to ignore the faces of the men who died. “What stories can do,” the narrator asserts, “is make things present.” The text continually returns to this image of the man he killed, giving Vietnam a sense of presence and immediacy through repetition and accumulation.

For the narrator, this sense of presence is crucial to the telling of a “true” war story, the success of which depends upon the reader’s ability to empathize. A true war story is a corporeal experience: it makes the reader “feel what [the writer] felt.” It is not an abstraction or a generalization (78). It is not moral (68). At best, it makes the reader respond with the single syllable “oh,” much as the very experience of trauma defies narrative assimilation (77). A true war story is a performative experience, an encounter with the ineffable real.

6. Along these lines, psychoanalysts Bessel van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart differentiate between “narrative” and “traumatic” memory, arguing that traumatic experience “is, in a sense, timeless. It is not transformed into a story, placed in time, with a beginning, a middle, and an end” (177). This distinction, which assumes that “normal” memory is driven by narrative epistemology, is useful as a paradigm for seeing how O’Brien’s “story-truth,” while fictional, also struggles in terms of narrative coherence, scripting not a singular narrative account but a seemingly traumatic repetition. For readings of The Things They Carried that focus on trauma, see in particular Heberle and Jarraway.
As John H. Timmerman provocatively asks, “Can one capture the reality of the event in such a way that the reader imaginatively participates in it?” (101). For “imaginative life” to spark “a greater reality than the factual accounting” (101), for a true war story to succeed, a reader must have a proper emotional response, as best illustrated by the end of the metafictional “How to Tell a True War Story.” Upon hearing the anecdote of the slaying of a baby water buffalo by a young soldier who had just lost his best friend, “someone,” the narrator explains, usually “an older woman of kindly temperament and humane politics,” comes up after the reading to say that while “as a rule she hates war stories,” this one she likes: “The poor baby buffalo, it made her sad” (84). What the narrator thinks but does not say in response is “you dumb cooze”; “It wasn’t a war story. It was a love story” (85). The woman—who only exists as a hypothetical example, a composite of the many “older women” who have comprised the narrator’s audience—hears the story but isn’t really listening or doesn’t understand it in the right register. For O’Brien’s self-named narrator, the correct response is fundamental to the success of a true war story; as the last line of “How to Tell a True War Story” declares, “It’s about sisters who never write back and people who never listen” (85). Given the importance of the reader’s appropriate emotional response, O’Brien uses various rhetorical strategies in order to create presence, the illusion of the emotional experience of Vietnam. Such strategies include the emphasis on detail found in story-truth and the strategic invocation of autobiography.

“The Things They Carried,” the eponymous story that opens the book, uses lists of the objects “humped” by the soldiers and their exact weight in order to define the “real” parameters of Vietnam as experienced personally by the narrative’s soldier-characters. In this way, the war is about carrying flak jackets and artillery and even a human thumb. The literal heaviness of these objects stands in metaphorically for the weight of war, an enormous emotional burden O’Brien’s narrator shares with the reader. O’Brien’s narrative begins to “make things present” (180) here, in the opening story. If

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7. Heberle usefully discusses the water buffalo anecdote as an instance of misreading.
“things” in “make things present” stands in for the totality of the Vietnam War, in this story a seemingly exhaustive list of everyday “things” functions as synecdoche for the war itself. “They carried all they could bear,” the narrator tells us, “and then some, including a silent awe for the terrible power of the things they carried,” the possibility to kill and the attempt to stay alive (7). In a space of complete uncertainty—“all the mysteries and unknowns” of Vietnam—the objects they carried held “the single abiding certainty that they would never be at a loss for things to carry” (16). Over the course of the story, the list of tangible objects carried shifts to a list of intangible concepts and emotions, held together through the transformation of the central verb “carried” that serves as the organizing principle for both story and war. As the narrator explains: “They carried all the emotional baggage of men who might die. Grief, terror, love, longing—these were intangibles, but the intangibles had their own mass and specific gravity, they had tangible weight” (21). In the end, in the wake of their comrade Ted Lavender’s death, all they can do is to keep going, to follow Lieutenant Jimmy Cross’s instruction to continue, to “Carry on” (26), to carry their bodies, their emotions, the things that define war and give it weight. These “things,” as more than mere objects, carry, as Bill Brown notes in A Sense of Things, “not just the physical determinants of our imaginative life but also the congealed facts and fantasies of a culture, the surface phenomena that disclose the logic or illogic of industrial society” (4). Much as for Brown the “thingness of the object” is the psychoanalytic “Thing in excess of the object” (42), in The Things They Carried, the “things” humped by the soldiers represent what is real and approach, asymptotically, the traumatic reality of war.

As the titular story suggests, a central project of The Things They Carried is, I would argue, allowing the reader to understand the Real of Vietnam, in both the commonsense and Lacanian use of the term. Much as the reader comes to understand the weight of war through its details, the “shit field,” presented to the reader in the series of stories devoted to Norman Bowker, comes to embody “all the waste that was Vietnam, all the vulgarity and horror” (O’Brien 168, 185). Significantly, however, this “excremental assault,” to borrow from the title of David Jarraway’s influential essay, also marks the
unspeakability of war; what is most real and harsh also remains ineffable. In the story “Speaking of Courage,” devoted to Norman Bowker’s guilt over his friend Kiowa’s death in the field, Bowker is unable to speak of courage or of his experiences of war. Instead, he compulsively circles the lake in his hometown, contemplating what he would tell his father, his dead best friend, or his former sweetheart Sally Kramer (now Sally Gustafson). Yet despite Bowker’s inability to articulate this experience, O’Brien’s excremental metaphors speak over and around Bowker to communicate that experience to the reader. They do so by recounting the soldiers’ experiences of Kiowa’s death from multiple perspectives, as in the story “In the Field.” For instance, describing Lieutenant Jimmy Cross’s reaction, O’Brien writes:

The field just exploded. Rain and slop and shrapnel, it all mixed together, and the field seemed to boil. Carefully, not covering up his own guilt, he would tell how the mortar rounds made craters in the slush, spraying up great showers of filth, and how the craters then collapsed on themselves and filled up with mud and water, sucking things down, swallowing things, weapons and entrenching tools and belts of ammunition, and how in this way…Kiowa had been combined with the waste and the war.

(169)

As this passage makes clear, the “shit field” becomes one of the most “real” details of the book, providing a horrific, personalized counternarrative to the vacant “happening-truths” found in many history books or those narratives that glorify war. Here, Jimmy Cross accepts responsibility, muttering “my fault” in the field. And the implication of O’Brien’s legally declared “fiction” of Vietnam is that, ironically, it is in storytelling that the “truths” of Vietnam might best be spoken. After all, he exposes, as Wilfred Owen does in “Dulce et Decorum Est,” that “old lie” of dying nobly for one’s country. It is “shit.” It is perhaps to risk overstating the obvious or mere common sense that showing is, as we tell our students in creative writing

8. Jarraway argues that the novel’s use of excrement stands in for the unrepresentable abject of war; a soldier drowns in human waste, his body becoming the literal and metaphorical waste of war. Similarly, Tina Chen explores O’Brien’s use of the human body as a metonym for war.
courses, often richer than telling. O’Brien’s collection dramatizes this distinction, using image, using detail, as presence. If we might understand image as information conveyed to consciousness through the senses, it is through such sensory impression, the work of literature, of “fiction,” that Vietnam might be most clearly apprehended by those who haven’t experienced the war firsthand.

Much as these details help create or perform the experience of Vietnam over the course of O’Brien’s narrative, the strategic use of autobiography similarly works to establish O’Brien’s credibility as narrator, again insuring that the reader accepts this “work of fiction” as “truth.” To reiterate a fundamental point, I am not concerned with the way that O’Brien’s text is autobiographical, but rather with the way that the text announces itself as autobiographical, the way that it uses appeals to autobiography as a rhetorical strategy, a ploy by which to establish credibility, most notably through the use of “Tim O’Brien” as the narrator and protagonist. In this way, O’Brien mobilizes the resources of autobiographical metafiction.

To elaborate, much as Linda Hutcheon takes historiographic metafiction to be inextricable from historical narratives more generally, autobiographical metafiction takes autobiography as its point of departure; it is vitally connected to and fundamentally distinct from both autobiographical fiction and metafiction.\(^9\) On the one hand, the work of the book can never be separated from the life of the writer, just as the character of Tim O’Brien always bears the trace of the writer Tim O’Brien, however different they might be. Yet it is also, paradoxically, insistent on its fictionality, demonstrating a level of self-awareness that sets it apart from autobiographical fiction in the traditional sense. To cite a familiar example, Sylvia Plath’s The Bell Jar, published as “fiction,” is recognizable as autobiographical only to a person who has read a biography of Plath; in fact, Plath published the text under a pseudonym in order to distance herself

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\(^9\) See in particular chapter 7 of A Poetics of Postmodernism. One of Hutcheon’s projects in that chapter is to situate historiographic metafiction along a historical continuum, pointing out the distinctions between historiographic metafiction proper, the nineteenth-century historical novel, and the nonfiction novel of the 1960s. Carpenter evokes Hutcheon’s analysis to suggest that The Things They Carried might be apprehended as “historiographic metafiction.”
from it as much as possible. At the other end of the spectrum, O’Brien’s novel reminds the reader again and again that the narrator is, like its author, an aging writer and veteran. Despite such self-consciousness about its narrative situation, however, O’Brien’s text is not merely a playful piece of metafiction along the lines of John Barth’s classic Lost in the Funhouse; while metafictional texts are by definition self-conscious of their status as fiction, they are not necessarily autobiographical or explicit about their autobiographical nature. The story “Lost in the Funhouse,” while about a character, Ambrose, who it can be assumed becomes a writer, never overtly acknowledges or even implies that the text is in any way “true.” Unlike these classic examples of autobiographical fiction and metafiction, then, O’Brien’s self-consciousness does not allow the reader to forget that the narrator is ineluctably linked to the author, despite the fact that the book is a “work of fiction,” only deriving a “few” details from the author’s life. The author’s name, I should think, is more than a simple “detail.” It is the central detail. Such a move necessarily raises two interrelated questions: why does O’Brien do this, and what are the effects?  

If the first of these questions is ultimately unanswerable, we might understand the book’s autobiographical impetus and its significance in light of its subject matter. That is, if generic labeling creates an intellectual framework that allows us to pose particular questions, we need to explore this text as both autobiographical and as a work of Vietnam literature. Within these historical and generic contexts, the act of naming, of staging autobiography, has much to do with the awareness that writing and reading a “true” war story are difficult and emotionally charged acts, as the narrator’s metafictional commentary suggests. While “story-truth” provides the imaginative landscape necessary to make Vietnam come alive in the figure of the dainty young man of about twenty, the autobiographical gestures remind the reader of the stakes in that reality. This appeal to credibility through autobiography not only nods to the

10. Tobey C. Herzog’s essay offers eight hypotheses as to why O’Brien chooses to name a character after himself, ranging from humor to aesthetics, ultimately suggesting that the elusive “answer” lies in some combination and posing a warning to the reader who dares to look for the “truth.”
critical assumption that the only one authorized to tell the story of Vietnam is the one who experienced it but also plays into a widespread cultural valorization of personal experience, as the glut of contemporary memoirs and the phenomenon of reality TV undoubtedly reveal. In this way, over the course of The Things They Carried, O’Brien works hard to create a believable persona in his narrator-protagonist, Tim O’Brien, in order to allow his narrative to function as history, to be taken, as the epigraph reminds us, as a “statement of actual things.” Indeed, for many of my students, O’Brien’s narrative is the only sustained history of Vietnam they have read.

While metafiction, according to Patricia Waugh’s important analysis, raises questions about the relationship between reality and fiction, O’Brien’s use of autobiographical metafiction functions to create a patina of truthfulness and believability. Along these lines, one of the most striking autobiographical gestures is the book’s performance of nonfiction. A story like “Notes,” for example, reads like a piece of nonfiction, even on the level of tone and diction. “‘Speaking of Courage,’” the story opens, “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). Although this piece of fictionalized nonfiction is inevitably constructed and aestheticized in order to make a particular point—it isn’t actually nonfiction but adopts the rhetorical devices of essay writing—O’Brien’s use of Tim O’Brien as narrator urges the reader to take what he says at face value. So while both naive and cynical readers might wonder if the story of Norman Bowker is true, in the end, it doesn’t matter if Bowker’s story actually happened; what matters is that, within the context of The Things They Carried, Bowker’s story needs to be understood as “true.” As O’Brien explains: “You can tell a true war story by the questions you ask. Somebody tells a story, let’s say, and afterward you ask, ‘Is it true?’ and if the answer matters, you’ve got your answer” (83).

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11. As Marilyn Wesley writes, “The requirement of truth as a faithful portrayal of unique experience is the standard most consistently applied to the literature of the Vietnam War” (1). For a more thorough analysis of trauma literature and Vietnam, see Tal.
Ultimately, that possibility hinges on the believability of the implied author, if not the biographical one.

In broader terms, O’Brien’s text, as an instance of autobiographical metafiction, helps us to theorize the author and authority in postmodern literature. Over the course of *The Things They Carried*, the character of Tim O’Brien establishes and plays into conventions of narrative authority and the intentional fallacy. In short, much as Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault understand the figure of the author to serve as a unifying and authorizing principle, Tim O’Brien’s fictionalized account of Vietnam hinges on Tim O’Brien’s believability as a narrator and implied author.12 Even Barthes, who infamously proclaimed the death of the author and the birth of the reader, argues: “Once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing” (147). Thus the assumption of an author allows the text to coalesce into a stable body that might be investigated. The notion of the author is, as Foucault explains, “more than a gesture, a finger pointed at someone; it is, to a certain extent, the equivalent of a description” (“What Is an Author?” Language 121). “[S]ituated in the breach, among the discontinuities,” the author is “not a function of man’s civil status, nor is it fictional” (123). It is precisely in this in-between space that the character-narrator Tim O’Brien exists, always connected to the biographical finger to which it points and also fundamentally distinct. The “author-function” is, as Foucault instructs, “a projection” (127), which is used by the reader in the act of interpretation; it functions as “the ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning” (“What Is an Author?” Textual Strategies 159).13 In short, we use the

12. Criticizing writers such as Heberle on the grounds that they treat the narrator as “a thinly veiled reflection of the author,” Janis E. Haswell claims, “O’Brien consciously crafts a unified narrator to articulate an explicit moral message: that the pre-war and post-war self are in fact one unified person” (97). Despite her deft reading of the distinction between the real O’Brien and the fictional O’Brien, Haswell’s interpretation leans too far in the other direction, for fictional Tim O’Brien always bears the trace of the real author who created him (they do, after all, share the same name).

13. I cite two different translations of “What Is an Author?” because the version in Textual Strategies offers a slightly more developed discussion, while Language-Counter-Memory is more frequently quoted.
author to stabilize the text, to limit what it might mean. In this way, the rebirth of the author—evidenced by the use of author protagonists in contemporary fiction—becomes a strategic means by which writers who represent trauma earn credibility and the trust of their readers, offering an illusion of stability in texts that otherwise thrive on ambiguity and multiplicity. Along these lines, the repetitive references to the narrator’s age and job solidify the authorial persona, pushing the reader to accept the fictional construction as truth and forging an emotional connection with readers through the rhetoric of autobiography. And yet if we take these references at face value, we once again fall into the trap of the intentional fallacy; after all, O’Brien confesses, “Even that story is made up” (179).

The repeated use of O’Brien’s proper name not only pushes the reader to believe his narrative but also contributes to a sense of ethical accountability. While The Things They Carried might find its home on the shelves marked “literature” at our local bookstores, to call the story of Vietnam a “fiction” is to discount the experience as something other than “factual” or “real.” Like the case of Art Spiegelman’s Maus, (mis)placed on The New York Times fiction bestseller list, The Things They Carried demands to be recognized as “true.” Not only the war but also its stories have tangible consequences, as O’Brien’s series devoted to Norman Bowker makes strikingly clear. The first in the sequence, “Speaking of Courage,” establishes Bowker’s difficulty with communicating. The irony of the title, a phrase which acts as a segue from one topic of conversation to another, belies his inability to speak. Bowker doesn’t possess the skill (or courage?) to speak of courage. Even when asked what he needs by the intercom at the local drive-through, Mama Burger, he can’t muster up the guts to tell his story. And while “Speaking of Courage” ends with a scene of symbolic cleansing as Bowker bathes in the lake—with Fourth of July fireworks going off in the

14. In an interview with Harvey Blume, Spiegelman says, “I had an entertaining moment with the New York Times Book Review when Maus was given a spot as a bestseller in the fiction category. I wrote a letter saying that David Duke would be quite happy to read that what happened to my father was fiction. I said I realized Maus presented problems in taxonomy but I thought it belonged in the nonfiction list. They published the letter and moved Maus to nonfiction. But it turns out there was a debate among the editors. The funniest line transmitted back to me was one editor saying, let’s ring Spiegelman’s doorbell. If a giant mouse answers, we’ll put Maus in nonfiction.”
distance—the following story, “Notes,” divulges that his cleansing ultimately fails; unable to find work or a meaningful path for his life, he eventually commits suicide. Significantly, however, within the narrative logic of The Things They Carried, Bowker is not merely a casualty of Vietnam, just a clichéd veteran who can’t hold a stable job or move beyond the trauma of war. Rather, “Notes” tells another story, one in which Tim O’Brien accepts culpability for Norman Bowker’s death.

As a whole, “Notes” provides background information on the composition of “Speaking of Courage,” information that appears to provide “happening-truth,” due to the story’s adoption of the conventions of essay writing. The narrator explains that Bowker wrote him “a long, disjointed letter” in which he asked O’Brien to tell the story of what happened to Kiowa that night in the shit field, to tell the story that Bowker himself could not (155). “The letter,” the narrator continues, “covered seventeen handwritten pages, its tone jumping from self-pity to anger to irony to guilt to a kind of feigned indifference” (156). In response to Bowker’s request, the narrator explains, he wrote the story, intending it to fit in a novel he was composing at the time. (Indeed, O’Brien’s Going After Cacciato sketches a narrative reminiscent of Bowker’s alleged failure of courage.)

Yet in his explanation of Bowker’s response, it becomes clear that this version of the Kiowa narrative was, at best, incomplete and, at worst, a problematic fictional account. Upon reading the narrative, Bowker asks, “Where’s Kiowa? Where’s the shit?” (160). “Eight months later,” the narrator reveals in the next sentence, “he hanged himself.” The juxtaposition of these lines intimates that O’Brien, narrator if not biographical author, feels responsible for Bowker’s death. To put it bluntly, telling a story incorrectly exacerbates rather than heals trauma. Given the responsibility of the storyteller to tell the right story (and to tell the story right), particularly when dealing with a cultural and historical atrocity such as the Vietnam War, O’Brien’s text necessarily confronts the ethics of storytelling. While this concern with ethics comes across in a general

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15. Both Calloway and Haswell comment on the different versions of “Speaking of Courage,” including chapter 14 of Going After Cacciato.
sense through the book’s tendency toward metafiction—how to write in a “good form” or tell a “true” war story—O’Brien’s use of himself as a character offers a more direct engagement with questions of narrative ethics. After all, as the narrator explains, it was not Bowker who “experience[d] a failure of nerve that night. He did not freeze up or lose the Silver Star for valor. That part of the story is my own” (161).

The double meanings in that phrase—that O’Brien made up that part of the story and that it was he who had experienced a failure of nerve that night—point to O’Brien’s responsibility as a human being and as a storyteller. In this way, the repetition of “I’m forty-three years old and a writer now” creates a persona who is responsible for both the imaginative renderings of this history of Vietnam and also the consequences of this telling. O’Brien provides a name, if not a face, to attach to the guilt over Vietnam. As such, the use of autobiographical metafiction, as figured in O’Brien’s use of Tim O’Brien as a character, functions as one of the novel’s important ethical—as well as rhetorical—moves. In fact, the tension between fact and fiction at the heart of the novel’s generic status emerges from and contributes to the novel’s ethical impact. Following Richard Walsh, whose Novel Arguments contends that the very form of a novel can make a critical argument, I understand O’Brien’s use of autobiographical metafiction as a political, ethical, and rhetorical move, as much as an aesthetic one. As Walsh elaborates in his essay “Fictionality and Mimesis,” the distinction between fiction and history is rhetorical, involving a sort of contractual agreement with the reader that emphasizes “the quality of fictionality rather than the genre of fiction” as the “important categorical distinction” (111). Moreover, Walsh claims: “A rhetorical definition of fictionality is pragmatic, in that its criteria are not ultimately inherent in the narrative itself, but are contextual. The rhetoric of fictionality is brought into play whenever a narrative is offered or taken as fiction, regardless of issues of form, style, or reference” (115). With Walsh’s argument in mind, we might understand the rhetorical context and purpose of The Things They Carried as part of its fictionality and its particular fictional choices, a context that is inextricably linked to its status as a “war story.” And the discourse of “war stories” is, as the story of Norman Bowker highlights, inherently ethical, even if the
stories themselves resist easy “morals.”\textsuperscript{16} In practical terms, then, if the Tim O’Brien character establishes the credibility that is consistently undermined by his continual revisions, his metafictional technique, as seen in “Notes,” takes this one step further, explicitly commenting on narrative as an ethical act.

That novels can represent ethical issues goes without saying. That narrative, as speech act, is ethical warrants a bit more consideration. Beyond the obvious examples of didactic novels or those texts that overtly espouse an ethical message, narrative itself, the structure or form that constitutes narrative discourse, shapes ethical practice, as critics such as Adam Zachary Newton purport. For Newton, the term “narrative ethics” underscores the reciprocal relationship between narrative and ethics; it is not “the ethics of narrative” but “narrative as ethics” and “ethics as narrative.” In asserting both that narrative is ethical and that ethics takes a narrative shape, Newton’s analysis pinpoints three levels of narrative ethics: “(1) a narrational ethics (in this case, signifying the exigent conditions and consequences of the narrative act itself); (2) a representational ethics (the cost incurred in fictionalizing oneself or others by exchanging ‘person’ for ‘character’); and (3) a hermeneutic ethics (the ethico-critical accountability which acts of reading hold their readers to)” (17–18).

Though any narrative undoubtedly contains all three ethical levels, the literature of disaster—like O’Brien’s—necessarily raises the ethical stakes, since the problem of representation and trauma, of narrative and loss, is moral and psychological as much as it is aesthetic. Reflecting on ethics in content and form, such pieces of autobiographical metafiction are narratives about the consequences of producing and, even more so, reading narrative. As in the example of Norman Bowker, storytelling has tangible consequences, lending ethical weight to every instance of narrative. And the specific shapes that narratives take—in this instance, appeals to autobiography, the use of metafiction—become a means of grappling with the ethical demands of narration and representation. In Newton’s

\textsuperscript{16} According to Wesley, “The contrasting presentations of thematic and formal violence in ‘How to Tell a True War Story’—evocative description set against subversive representation—substitute ethical uncertainty for the accessible ‘moral’ of traditional storytelling” (9).
terms, the example of Norman Bowker is foremost a problem of representational ethics, underscoring the traumatic effects of the narrator’s fictionalized account; as the story strongly implies, Bowker kills himself due to the inadequacy of O’Brien’s representation. The water buffalo anecdote, on the other hand, illustrates hermeneutic ethics in its exploration of an inappropriate—and harmful—response by readers. Situated within the broader context of O’Brien’s metafiction, these two instances of storytelling make clear the stakes of the ethical project in *The Things They Carried*. Taking these examples as parables, we might understand them as directives on how to read *Things* as a whole, as well as a reflection on O’Brien’s choices as a writer; that is, the book can have consequences for the real-life Norman Bowkers who read it, and we have an obligation as readers to read with sensitivity and awareness.

To consider more clearly the relationship between ethics and the narrative strategies in *The Things They Carried*, I want to return to the metafictional piece “Good Form.” Even as it reflects on the usefulness and necessity of fiction, “Good Form,” more than any other story in the collection, overtly raises the question of the narrator’s reliability. Opening with the statement, “It’s time to be blunt” (179), the narrator indicates that he hasn’t been candid up to this point in the text. Such a proclamation about its own tone makes “Good Form” read like a piece of nonfiction, an essay about O’Brien’s writing process, more than it advances the plot of the Vietnam narrative; within the context of a fictionalized collection about Vietnam, its metafiction encourages us to read it as a fairly didactic discussion of how and why Tim O’Brien does what he does. In short, it sets up the rules of the game. He continues, “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” (179). In the next sentence, which is also a single-sentence paragraph, O’Brien admits, “Almost everything else is invented.” In this double gesture, the narrator paradoxically asserts the truth by admitting that he lies or at least “invents”

17. Herzog provides useful references to the critical reception of *The Things They Carried*, including the personal accounts of audience reception at Wabash College and also formal reviews. In particular, he references Bruce Bawer, who accuses O’Brien of “overly disingenuous game playing” (Bawer A13; qtd. in Herzog 896).
material, making the statement, “I’m forty-three years old, true,” simultaneously a statement of fact (true) and also difficult to believe or accept at face value; after all, our writer-narrator has just admitted that his fiction is, well, fiction. He continues:

But it’s not a game. It’s a form. Right here, now, as I invent myself, I’m thinking of all I want to tell you about why this book is written as it is. For instance, I want to tell you this: twenty years ago I watched a man die on a trail near the village of My Khe. I did not kill him. But I was present, you see, and my presence was guilt enough. I remember his face, which was not a pretty face, because his jaw was in his throat, and I remember feeling the burden of responsibility and grief. I blamed myself. And rightly so, because I was present.

But listen. Even that story is made up.

This passage is particularly troubling because it appears to establish the narrator’s credibility through his admission that he’s an unreliable narrator. Yet if we take the narrator at his word, we also need to believe that “it’s not a game. It’s a form.” Following this logic, the passage above uses a story, a piece of fiction, in order to establish why the fiction is important in the first place, or “why this book is written as it is.” But when O’Brien says “that story is made up,” he immediately raises the question of what that story is: is it merely the story of watching a man die near the village of My Khe, or is it, in fact, the entire explanation that precedes it, including the statement “it’s not a game. It’s a form”? Creating an entire book around such paradoxes, O’Brien never allows his reader to stay on certain ground.

Despite, or because of, such narrative uncertainty, the story “Good Form” operates as synecdoche, standing in for the project of The Things They Carried in its entirety. The title of this key story necessarily raises the question of what it means to be “good,” a term that inexorably brings with it substantial moral baggage. To be good is to do what one is told, to be, in effect, moral; furthermore, a “good” book or “form” is artistically pleasing (“Yeah, I liked it, it was good”). In The Things They Carried, Tim O’Brien gives us a “good” war story, enjoyable and ethical in its presentation of Vietnam. It is not, as the title of Michael Kaufmann’s essay jokes, a
“bad form,” even if the nature of good form is postmodern and up for grabs. Paradoxically, O’Brien’s “good form” is fiction, an idea that goes against many fundamental beliefs about “good” war stories; one could argue—as many critics have—that the most important feature of telling a war story is that it is “true,” in the sense that it is a “real” account of personal experience. However, when O’Brien declares, “I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth,” he acknowledges that truth itself is a category open to question, arrived at here through fiction. While the provisional and multiple nature of truth might be welcome to postmodern theorists, it remains disconcerting to readers who look to O’Brien’s fiction as a way to get the “facts” of the Vietnam War. After all, O’Brien himself devotes a story to exploring how to tell a “true” war story. As “Good Form” demonstrates, a “true” war story is not necessarily a factual one; rather, a true war story is one that is based in emotional truth, getting the reader to “feel” the right thing, to have the vicarious experience of presence. And that is a war story that might not look like a traditional war story at all.

In this light, we might usefully understand O’Brien’s appeals to truth as performative. Rather than giving readers the facts (what we learn as children to be “telling the truth”), the narrator allows the reader to experience the “truth” of Vietnam through self-conscious assertions of authorial identity and performances of narration. When O’Brien declares, “I’m forty-three years old and a writer now, true,” that declaration creates a narrator who is forty-three

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18. Kaufmann’s essay riffs on this title to discuss O’Brien’s “bad form,” situating the book in relation to modernist notions of “good form,” on the one hand, and postmodern “bad form,” on the other. If, as Kaufmann argues, O’Brien is “careful to distinguish his bad form from the literary ambiguity and metafictional play that has come to be associated with other postmodernist writers” (341), I want to caution that the very term “bad form” reinforces the notion that postmodernism is apolitical at best and immoral at worst. What The Things They Carried shows is that postmodern play can constitute “moral” form, as Kaufmann’s own analysis ultimately reveals.

19. Steven Kaplan also uses the category of the performative as a way to address O’Brien’s work. Even though his concern is with the literary performative as a way of understanding the work of representation, rather than with specific performative statements along the lines of “this is true,” my reading of the novel is indebted to his.
years old and a writer; the narrator’s identity is established and solidified through the act of naming. Moreover, even as the novel as a whole asks to be understood as fictional, such performative statements work to create a sense of believability and truth. In the context of narrative, the very nature of truth might be understood not as “fact” but as constituted in discourse and therefore, as Foucault instructs, “something like a system of exclusion, a historical, modifiable, and institutionally constraining system” (“Order” 54). The “will to truth,” Foucault explains, not only “rests on an institutional support” but “exert[s] a sort of pressure and something like a power of constraint...on other discourses” (55). If the “will to truth” constrains what can be said about Vietnam, the nature of “truth” as it relates to Vietnam differs from others “in the forms it deploys, in the domains of objects to which it addresses itself, and in the techniques on which it is based” (55). Essentially, the “truth” of Vietnam can only be understood here in the domain of literature. Understanding “truth” as a function of discourse has implications for the story of Vietnam as well as for contemporary fiction more broadly, as it begins to account for the tendency toward self-named characters in postmodern literature. Such autobiographical gestures function not as an unquestioned appeal to truth via personal experience but instead serve as a means of interrogating the very authority of experiential knowledge; the book establishes the truth only to call it into question. In forcing his readers to question the truth as he tells it, O’Brien also pushes them to question truth more generally, particularly as it relates to the representation of Vietnam. The narratives and experiences of the Vietnam War, like the postmodern condition, are uncertain, ambiguous, multiple. In The Things They Carried, the author is not dead but resurrected over the course of the fiction; he is created through the stories themselves. Tim O’Brien “can be brave,” and he can “make [himself] feel again” (180). Tim O’Brien can create “Tim O’Brien” to be anything he wants to be. Tim O’Brien, author-character, functions as a performative figure with significant ethical, psychological, and political effects.

As in the familiar example of the wedding ceremony, in which the utterance “I do” refers not to a preexisting statement (a constative) but actually produces (performs) the marriage, O’Brien provides, within the context of his fiction, performative statements in order to
create and verify truth. In short, the (locutionary) statement “this is true” leads to the (illocutionary) act of verifying the truth, and together they perform the (perlocutionary) effect of establishing credibility. “This is true,” the writer declares, and whether or not the events actually occurred, they function as true within the narrative. They are true while other events, not explicitly described as true, are taken to be fictional. It doesn’t matter if Norman Bowker really drove around the lake or whether Tim O’Brien has a daughter named Kathleen. For these narratives to do their job, which is to authorize a version of a war story that does justice to the history, we need to believe that they are true, at least in the context of the fiction. So these autobiographical references are not so much references as they are constructions of an authorial persona who needs to be believed and whose statements are understood to be credible. The fact that O’Brien’s character is the same age and has the same occupation as the biographical author has no bearing on the performative aspect of his declarations (after all, the author has aged since the novel’s publication, while the character has not), although the easy conflation of the two serves as a necessary reminder about the ethical stakes involved in representation. Given the subject matter, O’Brien’s particular point of view becomes necessary to provide a personal story of Vietnam, one that puts a face to faceless history. In this way, the O’Brien narrator nods to the situated nature of knowledge and uses that recognition to address the ethical and political obligations of his narrative situation. Appeals to personal identity,

20. On the relationship between the performative and truth, see François Recanati’s essay “Some Remarks on Explicit Performatives, Indirect Speech Acts, Locutionary Meaning, and Truth-Value.” Jonathan Culler’s discussion of literature and the performative clearly spells out the relationships between the locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary levels of speech acts.

21. Arguably, all literary fiction is performative in this larger sense. Culler provocatively raises the question of whether “the felicitousness of a literary utterance might thus involve its relation to the conventions of a genre” (13).

22. Recent work in autobiography and life writing points to the performative nature of the self. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson write, a "performative view of life narrative theorizes autobiographical occasions as dynamic sites for the performance of identities constitutive of subjectivity. In this view, identities are not fixed or essentialized attributes of autobiographical subjects; rather they are produced and reiterated through cultural norms, and thus remain provisional and unstable” (143).
in this way, operate in service of, rather than against, the epistemological problem of postmodernity. Whether or not O’Brien’s tales are factual, they are true in the sense that they communicate the emotional experience of the Vietnam War as lived by O’Brien himself—narrator and character if not biographical author. Ultimately, though, the problem of truth is the reader’s. If we trust that the novel is indeed a “good form,” it becomes our responsibility to listen and to ask the right questions. “Did this happen?” won’t lead us very far, while “why does he say that it does?” might.

What *The Things They Carried* powerfully reveals is that capturing the “truth” of Vietnam is vital to all persons involved in the narrative exchange and the ethical stakes of the book as a whole. While O’Brien’s performative use of language contributes to a general sense of ethics, the performances of storytelling staged through the narrator’s revisions illuminate the psychological as well as epistemological problem of memory and truth as it pertains to the public and private experiences of Vietnam. Arguably, as evidenced by the collection’s compulsive retelling and rewriting of particular narratives, the book as a whole is largely about the problem of representing the veteran’s experience of Vietnam. The O’Brien narrator repeatedly asserts not only that the story he tells is fictional, but also that fiction is itself continually in process. In fact, such multiplicity actually enables O’Brien to tell the “truth” about Vietnam; as he explains, “you can tell a true war story if you just keep on telling it,” so you “tell it one more time, patiently, adding and subtracting, making up a few things to get at the real truth” (85). With each version of the narrative, O’Brien strives to clarify the experience—including the difficulty of communicating it—to his readers as well as himself. The truth is an asymptote that he continuously approaches but will never reach. The truth emerges in the very act of telling. Although the narrator comments that his writing is not therapy, the text itself begs to differ. The contrast between fictionalized Tim O’Brien, who writes and allegedly “gets over” the experience of Vietnam, and Norman Bowker, who cannot even communicate with his father and ultimately commits suicide, is quite striking in this regard. If a failure of communication results in Bowker’s death, *The Things They Carried* as a whole implies that the ability to communicate has saved O’Brien, who compulsively writes
about Vietnam, as his daughter Kathleen reminds both him and the reader. O’Brien not only tells the story of Vietnam but retells the story, trying out alternate histories, trying to get it right.

Such performances of fictional scenarios serve like the compulsive edict to “never forget” the Holocaust. Through the character of O’Brien, these retellings also reveal the moral and psychological work that storytelling can do, best evidenced by the series of stories devoted to the “dainty young man.” In a story titled “The Man I Killed,” which immediately recalls Thomas Hardy’s poem “The Man He Killed,” O’Brien provides a character sketch of this “slim, dead, almost dainty young man” (124). Like the enemy in Hardy’s poem, the man provides a clear double for the narrator—both men are scholars, both men go to war out of a sense of shame and familial duty rather than desire or patriotism—and O’Brien struggles with his guilt over the man’s death, despite his friend Kiowa’s rationalization that it was war and “the guy was dead the second he stepped on the trail” (129). Yet in the stories that follow, it becomes unclear whether O’Brien actually killed the man or if he was guilty only in that he was an American soldier “present” in Vietnam. As he explains to Kathleen, who wants to know whether her father ever killed someone, “I can say, honestly, ‘Of course not.’ Or I can say, honestly, ‘Yes’” (180). Certainly this ambiguity—or multiplicity—goes a long way in clarifying the distinction between story-truth and happening-truth, for in the imaginative landscape of The Things They Carried, both versions are emotionally true. But more importantly, for the aesthetic and rhetorical motives of the larger narrative, he needs to accept responsibility for killing the man. To my mind, the most provocative use of this narrative is that it enables the narrator to work through his guilt, to resurrect this man through his words. In “Ambush,” a subsequent revision or rewriting of “The Man I Killed,” O’Brien writes the story in such a way that the young man comes out unscathed: “I’ll watch him walk toward me, his shoulders slightly stooped, his head cocked to the side, and he’ll pass within a few yards of me and suddenly smile at some secret thought and then continue up the trail to where it bends back into

23. Maria S. Bonn’s essay “Can Stories Save Us? Tim O’Brien and the Efficacy of the Truth” asks both if and what kind of stories have such redemptive power.
the fog” (134). It is only in the process of retelling, in revealing that the “truth” is a fiction, that he is able to undo his sense of guilt and loss. Figuratively, the young man remains alive, embodying the cultural memory of the Vietnam War, which is made strikingly present for the reader.

Ultimately, what *The Things They Carried* enacts as well as describes is the usefulness of fictionalized autobiography when it comes to writing about historical events. 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,” as much as carrying on is possible in the face of atrocity. A fundamental part of that process is grounded in the use of Tim O’Brien as protagonist and narrator. The case of *The Things They Carried*, I think, not only demonstrates the continued interest in authorial identity from readers and writers alike but also provides a rhetorical and ethical reason for incorporating autobiographical material in an otherwise fictional text. This simple fact, that identity can be used to establish credibility and ethical appeal, itself is nothing new or unique to postmodern fiction. What is unique—particularly in light of the largely unquestioned investment in the personal in the study of trauma—is the self-awareness that such appeals are only rhetorical or performative strategies. O’Brien’s writing, as he asserts throughout the text, does not function as therapy. It does, however, function as history, providing a personal—and fictional—account of the Vietnam War. It is an account that recognizes that the best way to get at truth is, ironically, to lie, to make up stories, putting the “facts” of Vietnam in question. It is this paradox that many readers of O’Brien’s work find extraordinarily frustrating—because we still worry about things like authorial intent, especially when it comes to trauma.24 As readers, we tend to assume that if it’s traumatic, it must be true.

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24. Consider, for example, the controversy surrounding Binjamin Wilkomirski’s alleged memoir, *Fragments*. Published as the autobiography of a Holocaust survivor, the book—including the author’s name and his Jewish ancestry—was later found to be fraudulent, sparking discussion about the nature of memoir in general and the ethics involved in representing the Holocaust in particular.
Theorists of trauma focus on the expressive and therapeutic need to tell, and postmodern writers such as O’Brien play on these tendencies, incorporating the personal even as they overtly acknowledge the personal to be nothing more than a construct. As *The Things They Carried* illuminates, autobiographical metafiction both dramatizes and reflects on the failure of traditional narrative forms and authority in the face of historical and personal catastrophe. Rather than the death of the author, then, postmodern fiction witnesses the careful construction of author-characters looking for ways to write about death.

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**WORKS CITED**


