

Introduction

Landing zones

My life and my death got mixed up with their lives and deaths, doing the Survivor Shuffle between the two, testing the pull of each and not wanting either very much.

Michael Herr¹

Survivor shuffle

In April 2011, Tim O'Brien was invited as special guest speaker to read from his critically acclaimed work of fiction about the Vietnam War, *The Things They Carried*, at Arlington Central Library, Washington, D. C. The prestigious library is a short drive from the White House, from where, at the time of his speaking, two other ongoing military campaigns were being conducted. Unsurprisingly, in the audience at Arlington were a number of veterans not only from the Vietnam War but the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts too. With regard to the ongoing fighting in Afghanistan, in the Q&A session following his reading, O'Brien was asked by a member of the audience whether he believed that members of the Taliban also suffered from Posttraumatic Stress Disorder.² Characteristically, O'Brien's response was both unpartisan and empathetic:

My humanity tells me that one cannot go through the taking of human life, and watching your fellow soldiers die on your side, without suffering something. That it seems to me that Posttraumatic Stress Syndrome is a given when you go to war [...], you'd be crazy if you weren't crazy when you came home from something like that. You'd be *nuts* not to be suffering from a thing like that.³

1 *Dispatches*, [1977] New York: Vintage, 1991, 207.

2 More recent publications of the *Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Diseases and Disorders* (hereafter DSM) by the American Psychological Association (hereafter APA) use 'posttraumatic' as one unhyphenated word. Throughout this study I adhere to this convention although several of the texts I cite use the hyphenated 'post-traumatic'.

3 Tim O'Brien, Arlington Reads Program, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B8ivNokq,T7> (accessed 4 September 2013). Interestingly, O'Brien's use of the term 'syndrome' as opposed to 'disorder' is judiciously employed, as the Ameri-

O'Brien's words are an apt reminder of the emotional and psychological costs of all military conflicts, for all sides involved.⁴ His comments were made at a time when the U.S. and NATO forces were about to begin the withdrawal of combat troops from Afghanistan. Today, that drawdown, despite the continuing conflict, has largely been completed and the validity of O'Brien's observations well proven. In the intervening period between O'Brien's assessment and the completion of this study, the numbers of returning American and NATO soldiers diagnosed with PTSD has dramatically risen and articles from a variety of media point to the problem of providing these veterans with the necessary treatment and support systems.⁵ As these reports document, and O'Brien's comments underline, the whirlwind of carnage and confusion that is called 'warfare' does not remain isolated to the battlefield for long.

Subsequent to his active service in Vietnam, O'Brien has gone on to make an unequalled contribution to American post-combat Vietnam literature. His work has long been a touchstone for insights into the devastation of war and its psychological aftermath. In fact, I would argue that no fiction writer has ever explored more thoroughly and insightfully, over such a long period of time, the manifold consequences of armed conflict and its inherent traumatic sequelae. In his remarkable in-depth study of O'Brien's writing, Mark Heberle observes, "trauma is not so much the subject of O'Brien's works as it is the medium within which and out of which his protagonists are impelled to revisit and rewrite their life experiences" (2001: xxi).⁶

can military have for some time lobbied against the use of the word 'disorder'. For a more recent development on this see Mark Thompson, 'The Disappearing "Disorder": Why PTSD is becoming PTS', *Time Magazine*, 5 June 2011, <http://nation.time.com/2011/06/05/the-disappearing-disorder-why-ptsd-is-becoming-pts/> (accessed 29 April 2015).

4 For more on the issue of the Taliban and PTSD, see *Newsweek*, 'Do the Taliban Get PTSD?', 12 June 2010, <http://www.newsweek.com/do-taliban-get-ptsd-68973>, (accessed 29 April 2015).

5 According to the U.S. government funded RAND: Center for Military Health Policy Research, 20% of all US soldiers who served in Iraq and Afghanistan are suffering from PTSD. For more see *Invisible Wounds of War*, 2010, RAND Corporation. In June 2014, *Time Magazine* printed an article entitled "The PTSD Epidemic: Many Suffering, Few Solutions" in which it cites a congressionally mandated Institute of Medicine study which concludes that "demands for post traumatic stress disorder services among service members and veterans are at unprecedented levels and are climbing", <http://time.com/2904783/ptsd-iraq-va/> (accessed 29 April 2015). Even more recently, the US Department of Veterans Affairs backed a further study that ties the guerrilla-style tactics of the Iraq insurgency "to higher PTSD rates" <http://www.research.va.gov/currents/1215-7.cfm> (accessed Dec, 2015).

6 Throughout this study I follow Heberle's practice of referring collectively to O'Brien's prose as fiction and to his longer published works as novels. In later

To briefly return to O'Brien's off-the-cuff response to the audience question about the Taliban and trauma, in a curious fashion O'Brien's comment points to the flip side of Joseph Heller's *Catch 22*. Heller's 'everyman' John Yassarian finds himself caught in a bureaucratic 'sanity trap' that results in each serviceman being shipped off to war, regardless of their precarious state of mind. O'Brien's conundrum of insanity, however, means that every returning combatant is caught in the firm grip of a certain blend of 'craziness'—a psychological disorientation that is perhaps best alluded to via the parenting skills of Philip Larkin's proverbial mum and dad in 'This Be the Verse'.

From his early autobiographical novel, *If I Die in a Combat Zone* (1973)—pages of which O'Brien had already begun writing during the final days of his tour of duty—through to his widely lauded storytelling in *The Things They Carried* (1995), O'Brien's literary output has repeatedly demonstrated how trauma results in personal devastation and mental anguish not only for the individual but also for their families and those around them.

In her groundbreaking interdisciplinary study, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996), the former Yale deconstructionist and renowned trauma-studies scholar Cathy Caruth investigates the intersections and overlaps between trauma and literature. Caruth, following Freud and a number of other medical practitioners, explores the narrative implications of a posttraumatic 'acting out', or as Caruth describes it: "the unwitting reenactment of an event that one cannot simply leave behind" (1996: 10). In *Trauma-tragedy*, Patrick Duggan makes the excellent point that the term 'Posttraumatic' is contentious given that it delineates "a false definition of trauma symptoms because they are anything but 'past'" (2012: 7). While the term may indeed remain problematic, I continue with the convention of using the prefix "Post" understanding it to refer anachronically to the traumatic event itself rather than the symptomology in which survivors find themselves spatially and temporally adrift.

Moreover, in literary trauma studies, the concept of an amnesiac compulsion appears to have attained an almost universal level of recognition, which can be seen coalescing around the Freudian concept of *Nachträglichkeit*—a belated or deferred return of the repressed traumata. Most importantly for the purposes of this study, Caruth argues that traumatic events are oftentimes so overwhelming as to become unrecollectable, and thus inherently unnarrativizable. Caruth's reading draws attention to the disruptive link between traumatic memory on the one hand, and the anachronic and disjunctive capacities of narrative representation on the other. And, in so

chapters I discuss the difficulties of genre categorization when I address with regard to each of the texts under consideration how O'Brien deliberately subverts literary and genre conventions.

doing, foregrounds the conceptual connection between trauma theory and literary aesthetic practices:

If Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experience, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing. And it is at the specific point at which *knowing and not knowing intersect* that the language of literature and the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet. (1996: 3, emphasis added)

In drawing attention to these correlations between initially disparate fields, Caruth has led several critics to consider narrative cultural forms as ideally placed for exploring trauma and all its symptomologies. In *Trauma Fiction*, Anne Whitehead suggests that trauma theory is “inherently linked to the literary in ways that are not always recognised” (2004: 4). While Roger Luckhurst argues that “the anachronies of novelistic narrative make the form an important site for configuring (and therefore reconfiguring) traumatic impacts for the wider culture” (2008: 87).

All this, however, is not without its challenges. As Whitehead acknowledges, the term ‘trauma fiction’ “constitutes a paradox or contradiction [...] trauma comprises an event or experience which overwhelms the individual and resists language or representation” (2004: 3). Thus, the concept of the absent event or amnesiac moment, which has been integral to so much literary criticism and cultural production, has of late come under greater scrutiny. So much so that Alan Gibbs in his *Contemporary American Narratives* (2014) refers to a “theoretical orthodoxy” obfuscating some of the more obvious needs of acknowledging the trauma survivor’s searing memories of traumatic events and their desire to articulate them. In his early trauma study on war veterans, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*, the medical practitioner Jonathan Shay also identifies a “social process of silencing the survivor” (1994: xxi). According to Shay’s taped transcripts, one veteran recounts an incident in which he recalled being asked about his combat experiences at a large family gathering. While recounting stories from his traumatic past, the room, he laconically noted, soon cleared: “After that I didn’t tell anybody I had been in Vietnam” (1994: xxi).

Shay, however, also notes

the fact that these veterans can speak at all of their experience is a major sign of healing. Unhealed war trauma can leave men as speechless as victims of prolonged political torture. (1994: xxii)

At the heart of this study, then, are a number of research questions and observations that at times delineate opposing and occasionally mutually

exclusive theorizations of war trauma. At other times, these same concepts become interdependent, coexistent, and if not universal, then very widespread. Justification for such a diverse yet by no means random approach might be found in O'Brien's own writerly resistance to any easy evaluation or uniform diagnosis of combat experience:

How do you generalize?

War is hell, but that's not the half of it, because war is also mystery and terror and adventure and courage and discovery and holiness and pity and despair and longing and love. War is nasty; war is fun. War is thrilling; war is drudgery. War makes you a man; war makes you dead. (*Things*, 76)

Clearly then, any singular conceptualization of combat trauma and its possible recovery is neither beneficial nor adequate to deal with the multifaceted nature of O'Brien's fictional concerns. Rather, O'Brien's fiction presents his readers with an array of emotionally complex stories, the vast majority of which revolve around traumatized military combatants embroiled in the Vietnam War, or Vietnam veterans struggling to come to terms with their post-combat return to civilian life. Significantly, however, O'Brien's weapon of choice throughout his long writing career has steadfastly remained the art of storytelling—clear-sightedly bearing witness to what the great Scottish poet Louis McNiece once described as “the drunkenness of things being various”.

That being said, there are a number of lines of inquiry, which remain pivotal throughout this study, and I would like to focus on them here. Firstly, I aim to examine how O'Brien has engaged with narrativizing a subject matter often deemed unnarrativizable. In other words, to what degree does O'Brien successfully go about using disparate narrative strategies and literary tropes to represent not only the magnitude of traumatic suffering and psychological torment but also the various aspects inherent in (re)covering traumatic memory? It is worth noting here, by using the parenthesis, I am attempting to highlight the multiple versions of memory recall explored in O'Brien's work. Firstly, there is the notion of ‘recovering’ a memory, suggesting the faithful and accurate recollection of a traumatic event. A different perspective, however, is inferred by my use of the terms ‘covering’ and ‘re-covering’ thereby implying that a new version of an old event is in play. This alludes to the possibility that although the traumatic details have not been fully and precisely ‘recovered’, this original memory may well have been ‘overlaid’ with a workable version that still allows for the trauma survivor’s ‘full recovery’, or at least the sufficient diminution of traumatic sequelae.

A second but related issue is how do O'Brien's texts facilitate a broader understanding of the personal, social and political issues inherent in bearing witness to trauma in specifically literary texts? Which is to say, how does

O'Brien's art of storytelling grapple with the very real, yet deeply problematic relationship between writer and reader? In particular, what do O'Brien's fictionalizations reveal about the difficulty of bearing witness to a specific kind of war trauma, which at times has arisen out of adrenaline-fueled, thrill-seeking behavior, as much as war crimes linked to a concept commonly understood as 'perpetrator trauma'?

As mentioned, in O'Brien's fiction there are surprisingly few characters who find their reintegration into a world without war an easy affair. In each of O'Brien's novels, his protagonists betray a variety of symptoms that stage both the manifestations of trauma as well as their disparate responses to it. Frequently, O'Brien's characters find themselves caught in a state of 'un-grace', if not disgrace. Loss, regret, shame and memories of cowardice in the face of danger, constantly threaten to overrun their narratives. It is a debilitating posttraumatic disorder that poses a direct challenge to the characters' sense of self. At times we witness this crisis already unfolding in the heat of battle. At other times, O'Brien's protagonists appear to be enmeshed in a post-war torment that has them "acting out" the author's own fictional rendering of Herr's "survivor shuffle". O'Brien depicts many of his veteran-characters as captives of a half-life state, caught between the stunned recognition of their own fragile mortality and a debilitating guilt at having made it out alive. It is arguably in the shadow of this trauma survivor's paradox that the characters find themselves ambivalently oscillating between the polarities of a life and death instinct, "testing," as Herr observes, "the pull of each and not wanting either very much."

Trauma writer

O'Brien's reputation as one of America's foremost contemporary fiction writers is well established. Following the publication of his war memoir, *If I Die in a Combat Zone* in 1973, and a subsequent number of critically acclaimed novels set in or around the Vietnam War, O'Brien has rightly become recognized as one of the most important voices of his generation who documented the experience and disastrous consequences of the American military intervention in South East Asia. Having won the 1979 National Book Award for his second novel, *Going After Cacciato* (1978), O'Brien has gone on to write seven more works of fiction, his widely celebrated storytelling tour de force *The Things They Carried* (1990), which received the prestigious Prix du Meilleur Livre Etranger, became a Pulitzer Prize finalist in 2010, and was named one of the 20 best books of the last quarter of a century by the *New York Times*.

Yet, despite O'Brien's North American reputation and the continuing prescience of his work, European academic interest remains surprisingly

low. Whilst many chapters, essays and commentaries have been written about the fiction of O'Brien, full-length academic studies remain few in number. Stefania Ciocia is the only writer to offer a book-length publication on O'Brien this side of the Atlantic. As Ciocia rightly suggests, the enigma of O'Brien's obscurity, despite the obvious artistic command of his craft, most likely resides in the subject matter of his writing:

In spite of the renewed relevance of his writing to the contemporary global political scene, O'Brien is not very well known outside of the United States [...]. [H]e is generally perceived – for reasons that are all too obvious – as a niche artist, the breadth of whose work, no matter how sharp in its insights and skilful in its execution, is confined within the realm of war literature rather than being judged against the parameters of great literature *tout court*. (2012: 2)

Notwithstanding the overall perspicuity of Ciocia's remarks, there is a danger of underestimating the growth of public interest in O'Brien's work. In the intervening period since the publication of his award-winning third novel, *Going After Cacciato* (1978), O'Brien's fiction has gone on to gain a much broader international readership and has since been translated into over forty languages. With a total of two million copies of *The Things They Carried* (1990) sold worldwide, and the publication of each new O'Brien novel an international literary event, O'Brien has clearly become much more than an obscure American war writer.⁷

Be that as it may, there have still only been four monographs published since Steven Kaplan's *Understanding Tim O'Brien* came out in 1994. Early studies tended to follow Kaplan's model of relying on O'Brien's biography to explicate much of his fiction, whereas more recent studies have tended to draw clearer distinctions between O'Brien the soldier-author and his fictional creations. In *Vietnam and Beyond* (2012) Ciocia analyses the entirety of O'Brien's fiction to date, albeit with the avowed aim of "go[ing] beyond Vietnam" in order to also "focus on gender" (2012: 7). Whilst Ciocia's study commendably highlights the centrality of storytelling in O'Brien's work, her narrower focus on gender and what lies "beyond Vietnam" leads to a rather eclectic study that is often at the expense of an examination of war trauma narratology, which I believe is the principal preoccupation informing all of O'Brien's fiction spanning a writing career of over forty years. My thesis departs from Ciocia's points of interest in order to present a closer reading of O'Brien's fiction, with the aim of showing how the author employs a specific means of storytelling and narratology, oftentimes related to postmodern

7 A cursory examination of British newspapers will reveal that since the publication of O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, every major broadsheet has reviewed each subsequent novel.

metafictional practices (while avoiding any artistic slavish adherence to its more obvious conventions) as a means of rendering the complexities, contradictions and disturbing effects of combat trauma.⁸

By 1970, before O'Brien had even left the theatre of war in Vietnam, he had begun trying to come to terms with the traumatising effects of combat through a number of short journalistic sketches and literary descriptions.⁹ The aftermath of the Vietnam War is a theme that reappears in one guise or another in every novel that O'Brien has written since the debut publication of his war memoir. Yet, despite the obvious biographical parallels between O'Brien's life and the fictional war experiences of the characters depicted in his novels, it is essential to bear in mind that O'Brien is first and foremost a writer of fiction. Indeed, whilst Vietnam War writing is frequently though not exclusively the terrain of war veterans, O'Brien has rightly cautioned against using his biography "to support a pop-psychology analysis of his life or a facile reading of his works as products of his own psychic therapy" (Herzog, 1997: 4). In fact, O'Brien has always been at pains to stress the fictional quality of his writing and rebuked other Vietnam War writers for adhering too closely to veridical detail:

At times, it seems to me, it is as if the writers are being held prisoner by the facts of their own Vietnam experiences. The result is a closure of the imagination, predictability and melodrama, a narrowness of theme and an unwillingness to stretch the fictive possibilities. (cited in Lomperis, 1987: 46)

O'Brien argues, therefore, that Vietnam War writers should focus less on the actual facts of what occurred to them during their military service and more on trying to find the artistic means to articulate a deeper albeit more ambivalent meaning or 'truth'. Thus O'Brien contends that "lying is a way one can get to a kind of truth... [not] a definitive truth, but at a kind of circling... hoping that a kind of clarity emerges" (cited in Bonn, 1994: 2, original ellipsis).

O'Brien's depictions of the psychological damage confronting traumatized veterans are some of the most convincing in American fiction. In O'Brien's final story of *Things*, "The Lives of the Dead", the fictional veteran-author speaks about the power of storytelling and its ability to reanimate those who are so sorely missed. "The Lives of the Dead" with its many echoes of Joyce's conclusion to *Dubliners*, functions as a paean to the narrator's

8 O'Brien's problematic relationship with postmodernism, along with his own public disavowal of its more "superficial" artistic practices, is considered in chapter 6.

9 These early autobiographical cum fictional texts are examined in greater detail in relation to O'Brien's war memoir *If I Die in a Combat Zone* in Chapter 2.

first love who died of a brain tumour when she was just nine years old. At the same time, O'Brien's story memorializes the fictive Tim O'Brien's comrades from Alpha Company who failed to make it back alive from their tour of duty. On the one hand, the narrative is seemingly optimistic, with its easy assimilation of a common literary trope in which the redemptive power of storytelling brings characters back to life. On the other hand, O'Brien's narrative invites the reader to think about the here and now, in which the individual might seem trapped in temporal and spatial oscillations between the past and present, the here and there, the alive and the dead. And as if unwittingly summoning up these traumatic memories with their unpredictable tendency to macabrely intrude, O'Brien's Tim remarks, "the dead sometimes smile and sit up and return to the world" (*Things*, 114).

To a considerable extent O'Brien's authorial success is achieved through the very troubled and troubling quality of his writing. Each of the novels considered in this study stages an idiosyncratic range of traumatic symptoms that appear to embrace the possibility of recovery and redemption whilst simultaneously disavowing any such glib optimism. Overall, O'Brien's indeterminate and ambivalent narration, constantly traversing as it does the borders between hope and despair, right and wrong, truth and lies, ignorance and knowing, frequently and curiously proffers these epistemological polarities only to seemingly position itself against each possible explanation.

On the one hand, O'Brien's multilayered narratives endeavour to articulate the link between the "knowing and not knowing" as a means of representing the psychic pain of traumatic experience. For Whitehead, the attempt to depict historical sites of trauma has led writers to the realization that "the impact of trauma can only adequately be represented by mimicking its forms and symptoms, so that temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterised by repetition and indirection" (2004: 3).

O'Brien deliberately and artfully constructs highly discordant and unsettling narratives that emulate many of the symptoms of PTSD, such as constriction, intrusion and over-arousal.¹⁰ And it is within the framework of this textual discord that we can view O'Brien's fiction as the realization of a broader definition of trauma writing suggested by Laurie Vickroy when she contends that:

Trauma narratives go beyond presenting trauma as a subject matter or character study. They internalize the rhythms, processes and uncertainties of traumatic experience within their underlying sensibilities and structures. (2002: 3)

10 I discuss the symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder in greater detail in Chapter 1. For a full overview of the diagnostic descriptors, see Appendix at the end of this study.

Correspondingly, O'Brien uses a number of anti-mimetic strategies to create an innovative fictional form of trauma testimony.¹¹ For it is precisely in O'Brien's use of stylistic devices such as repetition, numeration, fragmentation, ellipsis and aporia, as well as unreliable narration and unresolvable contradiction that aspects of the incommensurability of individual traumatic experiences are rendered in the very textuality of his storytelling. As a result, O'Brien portrays trauma not only in the content of his novels and stories, but also in the self-consciously stylized form of his writing, thus mimicking many of the attributes of trauma symptomology.

O'Brien's fictional career, then, has demonstrated not only the narrative possibilities of writing about trauma, it also successfully performs the inevitable failure of trauma writing. In other words, O'Brien's fiction displays an awareness of the artistic conundrum so beautifully formulated by Samuel Beckett in *Proust and Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit*: "There are many ways in which the thing I am trying in vain to say may be tried in vain to be said" (1987: 123). However, despite the obvious expressive limitations of artistically representing real-world traumatic experience, O'Brien refuses to retreat into a state of either naïve realism or postmodern relativism. Rather, and again, his fiction appears to fulfil the Beckettian dictum of artistic achievement: "Total object, complete with missing parts, instead of partial object", thereby successfully "straining to enlarge the statement of a compromise" (1987: 101–102). As a result my study places particular emphasis on O'Brien's aporetic and ludic art of storytelling as a means of suggesting that O'Brien's fiction not only narratively renders various aspects of traumatic experience, it simultaneously incorporates that which *it cannot* express, thus eschewing a level of reductivism that would negatively impact narrative meaningfulness.

By exploring the remarkable achievements of O'Brien's fiction, I wish to show how this author, in representing the effects of PTSD narratively and inventively, both adheres to many of the central tenets of dominant trauma theory, but equally offers new manifestations and insights in terms how we might go about understanding our real lack of understanding the real lived experience of trauma. For in as much as O'Brien's narratives are indeed about trauma, they are invariably also counternarratives about the impossibility of representing trauma. In fact, arguably one of O'Brien's greatest achievements in his writing has been his ability to maintain the requisite level of empathy and critical distance that affords his readers an insight into the posttraumatic condition whilst the author carefully and artistically delineates the inevitable limits of that very same insight.¹²

11 For a clear definition of mimesis, see Chapter 4, where I discuss the metafictional aspects of O'Brien's writing.

12 LaCapra warns against the "*unproblematic identification*" of the reader as either survivor or perpetrator with the depicted traumata, (a wholly spurious propo-

Trauma reader

As contemporary readers we should by now be well acquainted with the multilayered and polyphonic nature of textual production in a (post)post-modern era. Following Derrida's deconstructionist practices, one might even argue that meaning no longer means what it meant.¹³ As a result, a narrative's deliberate indeterminacy and self-conscious linguistic ambiguity can only but serve to re-enforce the burgeoning possibilities of interpretation. Not unrelated to this development, in literary criticism there has been the accompanying critical focus, primarily in reader response theory, on the role that the reader plays (to put it somewhat tautologically) in furthering the unending production of meaning.

In O'Brien's later trauma fiction, this problematic relationship between the narrator and reader is more clearly staged through a number of innovative metafictional practices. By showcasing an unreliable implied author and, what I call in chapter 5, his *(un)ideal reader*, O'Brien's narratives raise important issues around the difficulty of representing trauma for public readership. Integral to this is the question of narrativization and the ways in which the reader is positioned in a similar predicament to the listener of trauma testimony. In creating a form of trauma writing that foregrounds the narrative relationship of the reader to storytelling, O'Brien achieves what Anne Whitehead suggests all good trauma fiction writers should:

They create a community of witnesses, which implicitly includes the reader, so that the very act of reading comprises a mode of bearing witness. (2004: 8)

As I have suggested, it is in the act of bearing witness to trauma that a reader or listener is required to make sense of a narrative that is oftentimes discontinuous and circumlocutious, as the trauma survivor attempts to narrativize what for them may feel unnarrativizable. Accordingly, the epistemological disruption of conventional narrative forms in O'Brien's fiction becomes a necessary condition for a meaningful interaction between O'Brien's representations of war and his readers' (albeit limited) understanding of traumatic experience.

As I discuss in later chapters, O'Brien's narratives frequently depict fictional events that appear to correspond to many of the real-world experiences of the author. However, the use of these apparent correlations is a fictional conceit that O'Brien strategically employs for complex literary purposes. Throughout his novels, events are repeatedly retold with descrip-

sition in the first place) but instead rightly lobbies for a form of empathy and critical distance (2000: 27).

13 See Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play" in *Writing and Difference*, 2001.

tive alterations and misleading contradictions, thereby rendering them unreliable and, in the literal sense of the word, ‘untrue’. Other events (which may or may not have happened to the author) are deployed both within one novel or piece of writing, as well as intertextually across several novels. By introducing these autobiographical disruptions and autobiographical slippages, O’Brien deliberately undermines any claims to factual veracity or historical accuracy—which is one way of O’Brien saying it’s all fiction. However, by mixing war memoir and fabrication, O’Brien not only deliberately problematizes the narrativization of real-world traumatic events, he also foregrounds the contentious role of the reader in the process of literary sense-making.

On one level the narrative’s refusal to offer the reader a definitive version of the story, thereby permanently deferring resolution and closure, introduces an aesthetics of uncertainty that is directly relevant to issues of traumatic dissociation and amnesia. For, if the calamitous event is in some way simply knowable and communicable, the representation of traumatic alterity has been done a disservice. It comes as little surprise then that most trauma narratives incorporate an awareness of this troublesome paradox. Roger Luckhurst makes a similar point when he suggests that trauma writing necessitates both anti-narrative as well as compulsively revisionist textual approaches:

Trauma, in effect, issues a challenge to the capacities of narrative knowledge. In its shock impact trauma is anti-narrative, but it also generates the manic production of retrospective narratives that seek to explicate the trauma. (2008: 79)

On another level, however, through these elaborate narrative structures O’Brien demonstrates how the incommensurability of combat experience inevitably poses a problem not only for the literary representation of trauma but also for its reception. If Luckhurst’s “challenge to the capacities of narrative knowledge” is a problem of production, it is also correspondingly a challenge to the capacities of reception. Trauma writing, it seems, is not only difficult to explain, it is challenging to read. Ultimately, the gaping discrepancy between knowing and not knowing, integral to the act of reading O’Brien’s trauma fiction, forces the reader into a surrogate form of trauma witnessing in which the reader is no longer sure what exactly they are bearing witness to. Thus, the texts perform for the reader a trauma sufferer’s struggle in constructing stable and linear narratives of events that are frequently overwhelming and incomprehensible. This exemplifies many of the concerns regarding memory and testimony intrinsic to contemporary trauma research. Just as importantly, however, by highlighting the underlying connections between trauma narratives and their reception, O’Brien’s fiction questions the ease in which categories of understanding can become

themselves poor imitations of truth. In this sense, my study takes an interdisciplinary approach that considers O'Brien's contribution to the field of literature as well as considering aspects of his writing that inform us about real-world experiences of war trauma.

Specifically, this study presents a close reading of O'Brien's four war novels. Each of the main chapters is dedicated to the various fictional representations of traumatic experience and posttraumatic symptoms. I have chosen these four novels as they collectively provide the clearest expression of O'Brien's overriding preoccupation with fictional representations of combat trauma and its aftermath. Taken together I argue that the novels refashion conventional literary narratives of the Vietnam War. Furthermore, given that each of O'Brien's texts is more experimental and anti-mimetic than its predecessor, I consider the novels in chronological order. These novels illuminate O'Brien's restless search to find new forms of artistically representing traumatic experience and, as I will go on to argue, his skilful demonstration of the inevitable failure that this endeavour will result in.

Following the introduction, this study is divided into two parts. In the first part, 'Incoming', I focus on the conditions of traumatic encounters, examining how these life-changing events and emotional disruptions are narrativized in O'Brien's early novels. In Chapter 1, I explore some definitions and discourses of trauma and PTSD, which then provide the scientific and philosophical structure I draw upon throughout my study. By using a range of theoretical frameworks I am able to trace the correlations and disjunctions between O'Brien's war narratives and the theoretical propositions that are forwarded in the work of several prominent trauma scholars. Central to my purpose is to examine how these various narratives of trauma establish what Whitehead refers to as a "resonance between theory and literature in which each speaks to and addresses the other" (2004: 4).

Initially examining how representations of trauma have long been a part of the literary discourse, I go on to provide a brief historical overview of the development of the concept of traumatic neurosis originating in the nineteenth century. Fundamentally, the establishment of a scientific discourse around the concept of trauma has seen different interest groups make competing claims as to its definition and the nature of its symptomology. By highlighting some of these theoretical discontents I aim to show how a theory of trauma should be viewed as an ongoing field of inquiry and not as Alan Gibbs forewarns, an all-encompassing "theoretical orthodoxy" (2014: 1). Accordingly, I revisit the groundbreaking work of Cathy Caruth's *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, and her seminal study on trauma theory *Unclaimed Experience* with particular reference to her concept of the *belatedness* of traumatic suffering, and her influential notion of a literally "re-lived" experience of the traumatic event. These two conceptual tools of the trauma theory trade—widely disseminated over the past two decades

are then re-examined in the light of Gibbs' incisive critical intervention in *Contemporary American Trauma Narratives* (2014). Gibbs, drawing on a variety of more recent trauma studies—not least among them Ruth Ley's excellent *Trauma: A Genealogy* and Roger Luckhurst's *The Trauma Question*—challenges the veracity and academic rigor of Caruth's widespread theoretical concepts as well as their uncritical acceptance in certain trauma studies. Moreover, Gibbs usefully distinguishes between aspects of survivor and perpetrator trauma in contrast to a more universal definition of PTSD—an issue of clear relevance to any study of O'Brien and his traumatic depictions of war crimes such as the infamous massacre at My Lai.

In Chapter 2, I examine O'Brien's war memoir *If I Die in a Combat Zone* (1973). This autobiographical book is undoubtedly O'Brien's most conventional and realist rendition of his tumultuous experiences during his year of combat service in Vietnam. However, even here, O'Brien manages to rewrite the traditional war memoir. Moving away from a fidelity to his actual experiences, O'Brien draws heavily upon literary and philosophical sources as he experiments with his first intertextual skirmishes in an attempt to address broader questions of courage, loyalty and self-determination. Following the publication of *If I Die*, O'Brien abandons any remaining adherence to reality and realism by resituating the Vietnam debacle in wholly fictional settings. In Chapter 3, I consider O'Brien's pioneering Vietnam (fantasy) war novel, *Going after Cacciato* (1978). In this chapter I show how the elaborate anti-mimetic narrative structure, told through the prism of Paul Berlin's extended waking dream, can be considered O'Brien's first concentrated endeavour to both *thematically* and *stylistically* mimic the symptomology of war trauma. Moreover, that O'Brien's novel so radically departs from mere plot fragmentation and leaves us rather with a number of unresolvable narrative contradictions, introduces a counternarrative that appears to deliberately reject the possibility of *any* successful fictional representation of the historic events of the Vietnam War.

In Part Two, 'Homecoming', I examine two later war novels, both published in the nineties, to examine O'Brien's discontinuous and elliptical depictions of the emotional and psychological aftermath for the returning soldiers and their families. In Chapter 4 and 5 I analyse O'Brien's most critically acclaimed composite novel *The Things They Carried*. The first of these chapters discusses the author's use of metafiction and textual disruptions, along with the deliberate obfuscation of categories such as fact and fiction, truth and lies, and certitude and doubt. I consider in which ways O'Brien employs these textual strategies as a means of artistically representing the troubling uncertainties of the Vietnam experience and how his tales of combat (mis)remembered, radically subverts the authorial voice of the classic war memoir. Moreover, by staging a fictional autobiography that nevertheless lays claim to its veracity and authority by gesturing beyond the

frame of the stories to the real-world life of the author, Tim O'Brien, the text arguably reflects the ongoing psychological crisis in the narrative, thereby mimicking the undermining of the unified subject in the aftermath of a traumatic encounter. Traditionally, as Rainer Emig has noted,

The biography is the symbolic narrative that institutionalises a subjectivity. At the same time it obscures the traces of the processes undergone to achieve this subjectivity. (1997: 218)

It is my contention, then, that O'Brien, through the narrative staging of autobiographical details, whilst revealing the fictionalized and unreliable quality of the events described, displays the very traces and processes that inform the construction of the (un)stable traumatized subject, thus bringing into question the overall authenticity of the war narrative at hand.

In Chapter 5, Going to war with the (ideal) reader, I revisit *The Things They Carried* and these questions of subjectivity, to focus on the role of the reader in relation to O'Brien's metafictional strategies. In particular, I consider how O'Brien's fictive staging of a pseudo-autobiography is revealing of the unsettling effect of trauma testimony on a reader/listener, in so far as both are inevitably engaging in an ill-fated attempt to (re)construct a reliable linear narrative. Moreover, I explore the implications of using an unreliable eponymous narrator on the novel's ambivalent and ambiguous relationship to the act of bearing witness. On the one hand, O'Brien's narrator repeatedly appeals to the reader to understand and 'feel' the emotional impact of the war. On the other hand, the narrator, with his oftentimes blatantly contradictory authorial interjections, consistently frustrates any attempt to make sense of the fictive war-veteran's history. This, I argue, underscores the reader's inability to ever apprehend the full force of combat experience.

In my final chapter I examine *In the Lake of the Woods*, O'Brien's most postmodern anti-narrative novel to date. Here, we are confronted with the author's disturbing examination of perpetrator trauma. Cast in the shadow of the My Lai Massacre, O'Brien explores the nexus between guilt and rage, in which one of the novel's many unresolvable mysteries might have included the protagonist's heinous murder of his own wife.

Overall, my thesis argues that O'Brien's form of narratology strangely and knowingly highlights the problematic and tendentious aspects of the literary representation of traumatic events and the difficulty of bearing witness to them. With the employment of elliptical and discontinuous texts, conjoined with an accomplished ability to regale the reader with anecdotes that can only but seem uncannily true, O'Brien's fiction appears to both encourage and contest the much vaunted role of the reader in the so-called act of "bearing witness". Simply put, in as much as O'Brien's narrative posits an ideal reader that can identify with or emotionally "feel" the impact of the

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trauma depicted within the pages of his novels, it also establishes a counternarrative that textually embodies for the reader the very impossibility of that intellectual or emotional identification. Moreover, we not only see the narrator acknowledge his inability to accurately recall the events of his trauma, the narrative implication is that were these events ever to be correctly remembered, the reader will still fail to grasp their full import. By examining the multiple narratives of trauma, crisis and recovery in O'Brien's fiction, this study not only aims to explore the relationship between various forms of war trauma and their modes of representation, I also hope to highlight the deeply problematic role of bearing witness to combat trauma in this particular author's war fiction. Thus, we can speak of O'Brien's writing, in the aftermath of traumatic experience, as performing a rejection of representational certainties. Ultimately, of course, it is a refusal to be held in thrall to one theoretical orthodoxy or another, in what might be termed the literary and artistic embodiment of Herr's proverbial "survivor shuffle".