“The Things Men Do”:
The Gendered Subtext
in Tim O’Brien’s *Esquire* Stories

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Tim O’Brien’s 1990 book of interlocked stories, *The Things They Carried*, garnered one rave review after another, reinforcing O’Brien’s already established position as one of the most important veteran writers of the Vietnam War. The Penguin paperback edition serves up six pages of superlative blurbs like “consummate artistry,” “classic,” “the best American writer of his generation,” “unique,” and “master work.” A brilliant metafictionist, O’Brien captures the moral and ontological uncertainty experienced by men at war, along with enough visceral realism to “make the stomach believe,” as his fictional narrator, Tim O’Brien, puts it. This narrator’s name and the book’s dedication to its own fictional characters are just two indications of how crafty and self-reflexive O’Brien can be about his representational and narrative strategies. By exposing so much of his own artifice, he seems to practice Michael Herr’s much earlier recognition that after Vietnam there is “not much chance anymore for history to go on unself-consciously” (43). Yet, O’Brien—and his reviewers—seem curiously unselfconscious about this book’s obsession with and ambivalence about representations of masculinity and femininity, particularly in the five stories originally published during the 1980s in *Esquire*. If this observation is accurate, and if, as one reviewer (Harris) claims, O’Brien’s book exposes the nature of all war stories,” then we might postulate that “all war stories” are constituted by what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls, in another context, a “drama of gender difference” (6). The book diverts attention from this central play by constructing an elaborate and captivating metafictional surface, but the drama is finally exposed by the sheer exaggeration and aggressiveness of its gendered roles and gendering gestures. “The things” his male characters “carried” to war, it turns out, include plenty of patriarchal baggage. O’Brien purports to tell “true” war stories, but stops short of
fully interrogating their ideological underpinnings—either in terms of the binary construction of gender that permeates representations of war in our culture, or in terms of the Vietnam War itself as a political event implicated in racist, ethnocentric assumptions. Hence, the text offers no challenge to a discourse of war in which apparently innocent American men are tragically wounded and women are objectified, excluded, and silenced. My intent in bringing this subtext to light is not to devalue O’Brien’s technical skill or emotional depth, but to account for my own discomfort as a female reader and to position The Things They Carried within a larger cultural project to rewrite the Vietnam War from a masculinist and strictly American perspective.

As much about the act of writing as about war itself, O’Brien’s book celebrates the reconstructive power of the imagination, which gives shape, substance, and significance to slippery emotion and memory. We might even say that imagination itself—as embodied in the act of storytelling—plays the hero in this book, countering our national propensity for amnesia and offering the hope of personal redemption. O’Brien has often spoken of the imagination as a morally weighted force shaping the narratives and myths we live by. In Timothy Lomperis’s Reading the Wind, for instance, O’Brien comments, “It’s a real thing and I think influences in a major way the kind of real-life decisions we made to go to the war or not to go to the war. Either way, we imagine our futures and then try to step into our own imaginations … the purpose of fiction is to explore moral quandaries” (48, 52). In a more recent interview, he claims “exercising the imagination is the main way of finding truth” (Naparsteck 10). Taking his cue from O’Brien, critic Philip Beidler asserts that form, theme, and moral imperative merge in The Things They Carried: “It is at once a summation of Tim O’Brien’s re-writing of the old dialectic of facts and fictions and a literally exponential prediction of new contexts of vision and insight, of new worlds to remember, imagine, believe” (32–33).

O’Brien has a genius for making poetry out of such prolix abstractions, and some of the most arresting passages in the book reflect on the craft and epistemology of writing. At some points, the book asserts, with poststructuralist sophistication, that stories displace and reconstitute reality and define the self: “Stories are for eternity, when memory is erased, when there is nothing to remember except the story” (40). At other points, O’Brien emphasizes the communicative power of storytelling: “The thing about a story is that you dream as you tell it, hoping that others might then dream along with you, and this way memory and imagination and language combine to make spirits in your head” (259). By the end of the book, storytelling even carries the power of salvation and transubstantiation: “As a writer now, I want to save Linda’s life … in a story I can steal her soul. I can revive, at least briefly, that which is absolute and unchanging. In a story, miracles can happen” (265). Writing, like life, entails choice; unlike life, it also offers endless possibility. Hence, O’Brien’s stories often offer multiple
versions of "reality," complicating the ambiguously entwined experience, memory, and retelling of Vietnam: "In any war story, but especially in a true one, it's difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen. What seems to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way" (78). The book insistently asserts that "story-truth is truer sometimes than happening truth" (203) and admits that some stories, are simply "beyond telling" (79), can only be apprehended by those who experienced the event. Storytelling is finally a ritual both private and shared, a yearning toward wholeness, coherence, and meaning even while admitting their elusiveness.1

But who is invited to share this ritual? Despite its valorization of storytelling, _The Things They Carried_ repeatedly underscores the incommunicability of war. This paradox has been identified by Kali Tal, who defines writing by Vietnam veterans as a literature of trauma, with analogues to writing by survivors of the Holocaust, slavery, incest, rape, and torture. For Tal, "Trauma literature demonstrates the unbridgeable gap between writer and reader and thus defines itself by the impossibility of its task—the communication of the traumatic experience" ("Speaking" 218). Tal challenges critics to account for the "inherent contradiction within literature by Vietnam veterans" by recognizing that "the symbols generated by liminality are readable only to those familiar with the alphabet of trauma" (239). I agree in general with this claim but would qualify it with Susan Jeffords's argument that revisionist cultural and literary productions over the past decade have restored the once-stigmatized Vietnam veteran to a position of power and status. Indeed, thanks largely to Oliver Stone, Sylvester Stallone, and Ron Kovic, veteran writers have increasingly had access to a discourse that is all too readable and familiar in our culture. The "alphabet of trauma," that is, has been encoded as a narrative of wounded American manhood that depends, for its meaning—whether tragic, ironic, or redemptive—on the positioning of women and Vietnamese as others.2

In an earlier essay, Tal found connections between the aims of feminist criticism and literature of Vietnam combat veterans who choose "to renounce their inherited white male power" ("Feminist Criticism" 199). Such texts, not surprisingly, are rare; more often, veterans' narratives fight bitterly to regain and sustain the power that the war temporarily disrupted. Hence, a consideration of how gender constructs affect the Vietnam veteran's rewriting of trauma opens a deeper gap than Tal identifies, in terms of both textual representation and the position and response of the reader. O'Brien often depicts war as inaccessible to nonveterans, creating a storytelling loop between characters within stories that excludes the uninitiated reader and privileges the authority of the soldiers' experience. But it is important to note that the moments of deepest trauma in the book occur when the masculine subject is threatened with dissolution or displacement. All readers are to some extent subjugated by O'Brien's shifty narrator: however, the female reader, in particular, is rendered marginal and mute, faced with the choice
throughout the book of either staying outside the story or reading against herself from a masculine point of view. O’Brien repeatedly inscribes the outsider as female, hence reinforcing masculine bonds that lessen the survivor/outsider distinction for male readers. Male characters are granted many moments of mutual understanding, whereas women pointedly won’t, don’t, or can’t understand war stories. In short, O’Brien writes women out of the war and the female reader out of the storytelling circle.

For all its polyphonic, postmodernist blurring of fact and fiction, The Things They Carried preserves a very traditional gender dichotomy, insistently representing abject femininity to reinforce dominant masculinity and to preserve the writing of war stories as a masculine privilege. Specifically, O’Brien uses female figures to mediate the process in homosocial bonding, a narrative strategy Sedgwick plots as a triangulation:

In the presence of a women who can’t be seen as pitiable or contemptible, men are able to exchange power and to confirm each other’s value even in the context of the remaining inequalities in their power. The sexually pitiable or contemptible female figure is a solvent that not only facilitates the relative democratization that grows up with capitalism and cash exchange, but goes a long way—for the men whom she leaves bonded together—toward palliating its gaps and failures. (160)

If we transfer Sedgwick’s paradigm from the realm of class struggle to the current cultural contest over the meaning, communicability, and “gaps and failures” of the Vietnam War, we can understand how O’Brien’s representations of “contemptible” femininity strengthen male bonds and deflect the contemporaneous assaults of an emasculating lost war, the woman’s movement, and feminist theory. We might even place the female reader at one corner of the triangle, her exclusion facilitating the bond between male writer and reader. Anxiety over the general incommunicability of trauma is thus greatly eased by the shared language of patriarchy.

Starring the now conventional trope of a democratic platoon of characters, this collection of stories suppresses any signifiers of age, race, class, or ideology to accentuate the common bond of masculinity. O’Brien closes male ranks in this book, celebrating camaraderie and preempting complicity or identification on the part of the female reader. Lavishing sensitive attention to the depth and complexity of men’s emotions and rescuing their humanity in the face of a dehumanizing war, O’Brien represents women not as characters with agency and sensibility of their own, but as projections of a narrator trying to resolve the trauma of the war. Although he seems at points to engage and question conventional gender constructions, in the end he does so only to quell threats to masculinity and to re-assert patriarchal order. For all its internal resistance to narrative closure, the book’s framing narrative is a hermeneutic circle: men at war act like men at war, and only men can write about it and understand it. Thus, while O’Brien frac-
tures the surface on his stories, discontinuity is finally subsumed by a seamless narrative voiced by a strongly centered masculine subject with the power to construct both masculinity and femininity.

Critics like Beidler who ignore gender can thus read _The Things They Carried_ as a high achievement in the cultural project he sees writers of the Vietnam generation undertaking: to “reconstitute [American cultural mythology] as a medium both of historical self-reconsideration and, in the same moment, of historical self-renewal and even self-invention” (5). Such a grand(ious) humanistic accomplishment can only be achieved if we overlook how dominant conceptions of culture, self, and history erase or subjugate the female subject. Once we admit this asymmetry and oppression, totalizing myths of “universal truth” like those Beidler reads in O’Brien and other writers of the Vietnam generation become impossible. A feminist reading of fiction by Vietnam veterans reveals quite a different cultural and discursive project: what I have elsewhere labeled “backlash” and what Susan Jeffords calls “the remasculinization of America.” Jeffords details how the proliferation of texts and films about the Vietnam War, especially during the 1980s, has contributed to “the large-scale renegotiation and regeneration of the interests, values, and projects of patriarchy now taking place in U.S. social relations.” More specifically, “the representational features of the Vietnam War are structurally written through relations of gender, relations designed primarily to reinforce the interests of masculinity and patriarchy” (xi). Because Tim O’Brien is indisputably canonized as a major “Vietnam author in his generation” and _The Things They Carried_ is widely acclaimed, it merits close examination in the context of this larger cultural work of consolidating the masculine subject, cementing male bonds, and preempting or silencing feminist dissent.

II

The core of _The Things They Carried_ consists of five long stories originally published in _Esquire_ during the late 1980s—the period in which Susan Faludi documents an “undeclared war on American women” and Jeffords locates the rehabilitation of temporarily outcast male Vietnam veterans. (Women veterans, of course, have never been visible enough to be cast out.) Three of these stories play elaborately on gender oppositions: “The Things They Carried” (1986), which opens the book, “How to Tell a True War Story” (October 1987), and “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” (July 1989). “The Lives of the Dead” (January 1989), the volume’s last story, reaches toward a reconciliation in which both masculine and feminine deaths are redeemed by the storytelling imagination. Read sequentially, these stories make up an increasingly misogynist narrative of masculine homosocial behavior under fire. Before reading the three central stories to track the book’s gendered subtext, however, it is worth looking briefly at
patterns of feminine representation in other stories to indicate how pervasively it is used to define masculine bonds and power.

In several stories, O’Brien introduces an invented ten-year-old daughter, Kathleen (a mother and wife is mentioned once but never shown). Her dramatic role is to prompt the writer’s memory and reshaping of his Vietnam experiences. Representing both a younger generation distanced from the war and all those excluded from its first-hand experience, Kathleen entreats her father to leave the past behind, forget about the war, get past his “obsession.” As someone who cannot “read” his stories, she reinforces the familiar criterion of “being there” and the more implicit criterion of masculinity as qualifications for understanding Vietnam. As a narrative device and muse, Kathleen prompts the narrator’s justification for writing war stories. In “Ambush,” for instance, she questions whether her father ever killed anyone, jumping in logic from “You keep writing these war stories” to “so I guess you must’ve killed somebody.” This is a familiar question in war literature, usually underscoring the veteran’s distance from the uninitiated. Here, the question gives rise to a moral and aesthetic imperative for blurring fact and fiction. To the ten-year-old, he says “what seemed right ... ‘Of course not.’” But “here” in the present-time of the story, he wants “to pretend she’s a grown-up. I want to tell her exactly what happened, or what I remember happening, and then I want to say to her that as a little girl she was absolutely right. This is why I keep writing war stories” (147). Although the narrator tries to be kind to his daughter and wrestles with the morality of telling the truth versus doing the right thing, he ends up having it both ways, thus maintaining absolute power. By lying to the young Kathleen, he excludes her from her own awareness of truth; he can only grant that she was right by pretending “she’s a grown-up.”

Truth is established as relative and situational; the (male) writer maintains absolute authority over its manipulation and what story is “right” for the daughter.

In “Field Trip,” Kathleen actually accompanies her father on a return trip to the “shitfield” in Vietnam where twenty years earlier he lost his best friend, Kiowa, and where he enacts an ersatz Indian farewell ritual. (Any cultural gap that may have existed is here bridged by ties of camaraderie.) Kathleen is a trooper, yet the war remains “as remote to her as cavemen and dinosaurs” (208), and she finally concludes her father is simply “weird.” After wading in the mucky field, father and daughter have an Oedipal moment of complicity in which the mother is excluded and her potential power defused: “‘All the gunk on your skin, you look like ... Wait’ll I tell Mommy, she’ll probably make you sleep in the garage.’ ‘You’re right,’ I said, ‘Don’t tell her’” (213). But this moment dissolves into distance again. Looking back at a farmer waving a shovel over his head, Kathleen interprets the man’s actions as anger, while the narrator says “No ... all that’s finished” (213). (With the Vietnamese farmer, unlike Kiowa, the cultural gap is unbridged, the narrator rejecting Kathleen’s reading that the man might have his
own anger.) In the end, the war is closed off to Kathleen and she’s merely along for the ride.

"Speaking of Courage," a post-traumatic stress story highly reminiscent of Hemingway’s "Soldier’s Home," similarly imagines a woman, Sally Gustafson, née Kramer, an old girlfriend of Norman Bowker’s "whose pictures he had once carried in his wallet" and whose small-town, middle-class reality is so far from Norman’s world of post-traumatic stress that she comes to signify for him the utter impossibility of communicating his experience or closing the breach between his pre- and post-war self. She has no actual agency or dialogue in the story, but lives completely in Norman’s mind as a synecdoche for the whole town that “did not know shit about shit, and did not care to know” (163). Did Sally suffer through Norman’s absence in Vietnam? Did she have her own traumas and losses because of the war? Such stories aren’t told in this book. Norman imagines several conversations with Sally, but each time realizes “there was really nothing he could say to her.” He pictures more perfect dialogues with his father, "who had his own war and who now preferred silence,” suggesting that understanding might at least be possible with another veteran, though it is never realized. In the end, Norman feels invisible and mute. The commentary, “Notes,” following the story, claims that the “real” Norman committed suicide, but not before passing his story on to Tim, who makes it his own and thus “saves” Norman’s life just as he saves “Timmy’s life with an story” in the book’s last line.

Several stories collapse representations of women, death, the enemy, and Asians. In the vignette, “Style,” the soldiers come upon a burned hamlet and a teen-aged girl dancing ritualistically in front of her house, in which lie the bodies of “an infant and an old woman and a woman whose age was hard to tell. … There were dead pigs, too” (154). Her movements are inexplicable to the men, and this inscrutability leads to the story’s real concern: not the grieving girl, whose suffering is beyond the Americans, but American (mis)interpretations of Vietnamese culture. Azar, the book’s hypermacho fool, mocks her movements, but Henry Dobbins opposes Azar and insists he “dance right.” The girl is given no motive, voice, or selfhood; she exists to dramatize an aesthetic and moral point about proper “style.” She is pure spectacle and performance, symbol of a whole culture’s incomprehensible otherness. As with all the other women in the book, there is no reconciling the gap of gender and, here, culture.

The only other detailed representation of a Viet person is the dead boy in “The Man I Killed,” which circles obsessively around the final fact and fetish of war: the dead and mutilated body. Here, the unrepresentable—death, Asian, enemy—is distinctly feminized, as if to underscore its absolute otherness. The story focuses on the narrator’s speechlessness and his imaginative projection of the boy’s life. True to his mission, he “saves” the soldier’s life by dreaming it in a story, turning the screw even further to imagine “He knew he would fall dead and wake up in the stories of his village and people” (144). The description of the body
emphasizes feminine characteristics: he appears as "a slim, dead, almost dainty young man. He had bony legs, a narrow waist, long shapely fingers. His chest was sunken and poorly muscled—a scholar, maybe. ... His eyebrows were thin and arched like a woman's, and at school the boys sometimes teased him about how pretty he was, the arched eyebrows and long shapely fingers, and on the playground they mimicked a woman's walk and made fun of his smooth skin and his love for mathematics" (139, 142). Presumably, this feminization serves to express the man's ill-suitedness for war, and it helps humanize the enemy. Ultimately, though, the narrator's task is to harden himself to guilt and horror, to "pull your shit together ... talk," in the words of Kiowa. The almost homoerotic fixation on the dead men's body suggests the narcissism Eric Leeds, referring to Klaus Theweleit's study of Freikorps troops, finds at the heart of warrior culture. In one of the blurrrings of the book, the narrator recognizes himself in the dead man but also makes him absolutely other, that is, womanly. Recovery from this trauma (conceived explicitly in the story as regaining a voice) rests on asserting the living, masculine self in opposition to the dead, silent, feminine other.

III

Representations of woman as inscrutable, uncomprehending, and dangerous are more fully developed in the longer Esquire stories. As the book unfolds, in fact, the masculine subject is constituted in opposition to femininity that becomes increasingly other: the woman who must be rejected because she cannot understand the male experience of war in "The Things They Carried," the woman rendered both pitiable and contemptible because she does not understand in "How to Tell a True War Story," and the woman who understands war too well, hence threatening male hegemony and phallic power in "Sweetheart in the Song Tra Bong." It seems more than coincidental that the stories that most deeply probe and most emphatically reassert masculinity should appear in this glossy, upscale men's magazine famous, as Faludi puts it, for its "screeds against women." The intended audience for this magazine (subtitled "Man at His Best") is unabashedly male, and though O'Brien's stories rarely show men at their best, they do speak to a self-conscious and perhaps threatened masculinity. (Anyone familiar with Vietnam studies will also associate Esquire with a controversial and often-quoted article by William Broyles entitled "Why Men Love War.") As with Playboy, the female reader opening these pages ventures into alien and dangerous territory. Ultimately, reading war, like experiencing, remembering, and writing it, is constructed as a masculine rite.

The narrative structure of these stories is very similar: alternating radically disjunctive passages of past and present, fiction and commentary, war and memory. The force that presumes to reconcile these dualities and overcome the confounding incommunicability of war is the writer's imagination, articulated from a mas-
culine point of view. In both the opening and closing stories of the volume, imagination is linked to an idealized, unattainable woman—Martha, a girlfriend at home, and Linda, a childhood sweetheart who died at nine. The first story plays one of the many variations on the imagination-reality motif and picks up where O'Brien's earlier novel, Going After Cacciato, left off, with Paul Berlin imagining himself pleading for peace at the Paris Peace Talks but admitting: "Even in imagination we must be true to our obligations, for, even in imagination, obligation cannot be outrun. Imagination, like reality, has its limits" (378). "The Things They Carried" goes further to limit the imagination, asserting that in battle, "Imagination was a killer." What this means, on one level, is that the nerve-wracking tension in the field could lead soldiers to imagine the worst or make a fatal mistake. But the story also establishes an inexorable equation: imagination = women = distraction = danger = death. The story's dramatic resolution turns on recovering masculine power by suppressing femininity in both female and male characters. Survival itself depends on excluding women from the masculine bond. In this first story, the renunciation of femininity is a sad but necessary cost of war, admitted only after real emotional struggle. It establishes a pattern, however, for the rest of the book.

"The Things They Carried" introduces the cast of Alpha Company and establishes their identity as a cohesive group, each manfully carrying his own weight but also sharing the burden of war. The story features Lieutenant Jimmy Cross, the platoon's 24-year-old C. O., who fell into the war via ROTC. He is presented as a man of integrity, honesty, and deep compassion for his men, a cautious, somewhat stiff and unseasoned commander with no inherent lust for death and destruction. The story is fundamentally an initiation narrative whose tension lies in Jimmy Cross's need to deal with guilt and harden himself to battle realities, which are here distinctly differentiated from the realm of imagination. Jimmy Cross's story alternates with lyrical passages cataloguing all the "things" men at war carry, including "all the emotional baggage of men who might die." These passages, echoing O'Brien's earlier constraints of "obligation," insistently repeat the idea that "the things they carried were largely determined by necessity. ... Necessity dictated" (4, 5).

Lieutenant Jimmy Cross's survival and his coming of age as an effective soldier depend on letting go of all that is not necessary and immediate—here equated completely with the feminine, the romantic, the imaginary. Becoming a warrior entails a pattern of desire, guilt, and renunciation in relation to a woman. The story opens by describing in detail Jimmy Cross's most precious cargo:

First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross carried letters from a girl named Martha, a junior at Mount Sebastian College in New Jersey. They were not love letters, but Lieutenant Cross was hoping, so he kept them folded in plastic at the bottom of his rucksack. In the late afternoon, after a day's march, he would dig his foxhole, wash his hands under a canteen, unwrap the letters, hold them
with the tips of his fingers, and spend the last hour of light pretending. He would imagine romantic camping trips into the White Mountains in New Hampshire. He would sometimes taste the envelope flaps, knowing her tongue had been there. More than anything, he wanted Martha to love him as he loved her, but the letters were mostly chatty, elusive on the matter of love. She was a virgin, he was almost sure. (4)

Martha’s writing—and, implicitly, her reading of his war experience—are sexualized through association: her inability to respond to his love and his longing suggest the blank page of virginity in patriarchal discourse. Though Jimmy Cross tries to realize a connection with Martha through this sacramental/sexual ritual, she is represented as aloof and untouchable, a poet with “grey, neutral” eyes inhabiting “another world, which was not quite real.” Martha’s words are never presented directly, but are paraphrased by the narrator, who reminds us twice that she never mentions the war in her letters. Like other women in the book, she represents all those back home who will never understand the warrior’s trauma. In addition to the letters, Jimmy Cross carries two pictures of Martha and a good-luck charm—a stone Martha sent from the Jersey Shore, which he sometimes carries in his mouth; he also “humped his love for Martha up the hills and through the swamps.” As the story progresses, Martha—rather these metonymic objects signifying Martha—becomes a distraction from the immediate work of war and caring for his men. His mind wanders, usually into the realm of sexual fantasy: “Slowly, a bit distracted, he would get up and move among his men, checking the perimeter, then at full dark he would return to his hole and watch the night and wonder if Martha was a virgin” (4). Memory and desire intertwine in a fantasy that fuses courage and virility and, by extension, fighting and writing upon her blank virgin page. In one of the book’s several retrospective “should haves,” Jimmy Cross remembers a date with Martha and thinks “he should’ve done something brave. He should’ve carried her up the stairs to her room and tied her to the bed and touched that left knee all night long. He should’ve risked it. Whenever he looked at the photographs, he thought of new things he should’ve done” (6). We are meant to see the move from chivalry to sado-masochistic erotica as natural and understandable, because “He was just a kid at war, in love,” after all. That Jimmy Cross’s sexual “bravery” might have been earned through violation and coercion is not considered in the story. The focus is on the male’s empowering fantasy.

Jimmy Cross’s distraction climaxes with the sniper shooting of Ted Lavender “on his way back from peeing.” Just before this incident, the company had waited tensely for Lee Strunk to emerge from clearing out a Vietcong tunnel. The language of sexual desire and union, coming just before Lee Strunk’s “rising from the dead” and Lavender’s death, links Jimmy’s imagination of Martha—his merging with the feminine—with annihilation of the self. As he gazes sugges-
tively down into the dark tunnel, he leaves the war and succumbs to a fantasy of perfect union between masculine and feminine, death and desire:

And then suddenly, without willing it, he was thinking about Martha. The stresses and fractures, the quick collapse, the two of them buried alive under all that weight. Dense, crushing love. Kneeling, watching the hole, he tried to concentrate on Lee Strunk and the war, all the dangers, but his love was too much for him, he felt paralyzed, he wanted to sleep inside her lungs and breathe her blood and be smothered. He wanted his to be a virgin and not a virgin, all at once. He wanted to know her. (12)

Such unraveling of gender duality, however, is dangerous, such paradoxes unsustainable. At the moment of Jimmy’s imagined dissolution, Ted Lavender is shot. As if to punish himself for daydreaming and forgetting “about matters of security”—but more deeply for abandoning his men in the desire to know the feminine—Jimmy Cross goes to the extreme of rejecting desire for Martha altogether. He reacts to the trauma of Lavender’s death in two significant ways. The first is one of the book’s parallel scenes of My Lai-like retribution, here bluntly told but not shown: “Lieutenant Jimmy Cross led his men into the village of Than Khe. They burned everything” (16). The second is guilt, entangled with anger that his love for Martha is unrequited. He reverts to a familiar binary choice—either Martha or his men: “He felt shame. He hated himself. He had loved Martha more than his men, and as a consequence Lavender was now dead, and this was something he would have to carry, like a stone in his stomach for the rest of the war” (16)—his good luck charm transformed to the weight of guilt. That night he cries “for Ted Lavender” but also for the realization, or perhaps rationalization, that “Martha did not love him and never would.” Jimmy Cross regains a “mask of composure” necessary to survive war’s horror, burns Martha’s letters and photographs in a purgative ritual reversing the opening blessing, and wills himself to renounce Martha and all she signifies: “He hated her. Yes, he did. He hated her. Love, too, but it was a hard, hating kind of love” (23). With this rejection and a newly hardened, terse idiom, Jimmy Cross completes his transformation: “He was a soldier, after all. … He was realistic about it. … He would be a man about it. … No more fantasies. … from this point on he would comport himself as an officer. … he would dispense with love; it was not now a factor” (23–24). His survival as a soldier and a leader depends upon absolute separation from the feminine world and rejection of his own femininity: “Henceforth, when he thought about Martha, it would be only to think that she belonged elsewhere. He would shut down the day-dreams. This was not Mount Sebastian, it was another world, where there were no pretty poems or midterm exams, a place where men died because of carelessness and gross stupidity” (24).

How are we meant to read this rejection? O’Brien is not blaming Martha for male suffering, for of course, the story isn’t about Martha at all, though she introduces the book’s prototypical figure of the woman incapable of understanding war.
Rather, he uses her to define "necessary" codes of male behavior in war and to establish Jimmy's "proper" bond with his men. We are given no rationale for why Jimmy perceives his choice in such absolute terms, nor are we invited to critique Jimmy for this rigidity, though we do pity him and recognize his naivete. Jimmy Cross's rejection of the feminine is portrayed as one of the burdensome but self-evident "necessities" of war, and O'Brien grants Jimmy this recognition: "It was very sad, he thought. The things men carried inside. The things men did or felt they had to do." Most sad and ironic of all, Jimmy ends up suffering alone because of his status as an officer: "He would show strength, distancing himself." Jimmy Cross's allegorical initials even encourage us to read his youthful renunciation in Christian terms.

At the very end, however, masculine bonds prevail and compensate for Jimmy's losses. O'Brien places the men of Alpha Company in a larger cultural landscape of men without women by alluding to cowboy movies and Huckleberry Finn: "He might just shrug and say, Carry on, then they would saddle up and form into a column and move out toward to villages west of Than Khe." The narrative voice here is very carefully distinguished from the characters, and it is hard to know how to take the conditional "might" and the self-conscious diction: as parody? as straight allusion? as Jimmy Cross's self-deluding macho fantasy? One possibility is that O'Brien means to expose and critique the social construction of masculinity, suggesting that soldiers' behavior in Vietnam is conditioned by years of John Wayne movies, as indeed numerous veterans' memoirs attest is true. Likewise, the story unmasksthe soldiers' macho "stage presence," "pose," and "hard vocabulary": "Men killed, and died, because they were embarrassed not to"; they do what they "felt they had to do." But these constructions are inevitably converted into behavior that seems natural and inevitable—"necessary"—within the ur-story underlying all war stories: the tragic destruction of male innocence. O'Brien's depth as a writer allows him to reveal the socialized nature of soldiering and to show compassion for the vulnerable men behind the pose. But he stops short of undoing and revising these constructions. In the end, men are how they act, just as they are their stories and culture is its myths. The story rescues the humanity of men at war and consigns femininity to the margins, thus assuring the seamless continuity and endless repetition of masculine war stories.

Because Tim O'Brien's characters live so fully for him he is impelled to follow up the story of Jimmy Cross and Martha with a vignette, "Love." Like George Willard, the lonely but ever-receptive narrator of Winesburg, Ohio, O'Brien portrays himself as the burdened repository of other people's stories. Here Jimmy Cross comes to visit character-narrator Tim O'Brien "many years after the war" to talk about "all the things we still carried through our lives." One thing Jimmy Cross still carries is a torch for Martha, and he shows the narrator a copy of the same photograph he had burned after Ted Lavender's death. The story
embedded in the story concerns his meeting with Martha at a college reunion. Now a Lutheran missionary nurse serving in Third World countries, she responds to Jimmy with the same friendly but aloof demeanor that marked her letters during the war. She gives him another copy of the photo to gaze at and reveals "she had never married ... and probably never would. She didn't know why. But as she said this, her eyes seemed to slide sideways, and it occurred to him that there were things about her he would never know" (30). Despite her continuing inscrutability and distance, Jimmy risks telling Martha that "he'd almost done something brave" back in college, and he describes his knee-stroking fantasy. Martha's ambivalent reaction widens the gulf between men and women and hints, with Hemingway-like ellipses, that she is either repressed, fearful, uninterested, or a lesbian; in any case, she is unresponsive to Jimmy's advances, which absolves him from any failings or flaws as a masculine sexual being:

Martha shut her eyes. She crossed her arms at her chest, as if suddenly cold, rocking slightly, then after a time she looked at him and said she was glad he hadn't tried it. She didn't understand how men could do those things. What things? he asked, and Martha said, The things men do. Then he nodded. It began to form. Oh, he said, those things. At breakfast the next morning she told him she was sorry. She explained that there was nothing she could do about it, and he said he understood, and then she laughed and gave him the picture and told him not to burn this one up. (31)

What are "the things men do?" In the context of this pair of stories, these things are both sexual and violent. Jimmy passes this story on to the narrator, joking that "Maybe she'll read it and come begging." But he leaves more concerned about the reader's response than Martha's, with a plea that Tim depict him positively, as if he still hadn't exorcised his guilt over Lavender's death: "'Make me out to be a good guy, okay? Brave and handsome, all that stuff. Best platoon leader ever.' He hesitated for a second. 'And do me a favor. Don't mention anything about—' 'No,' I said, 'I won't' " (31). O'Brien teases us with an indeterminate ending; if he is true to his word, then he hasn't revealed "anything about—" Jimmy's secret, and we are left wondering. If the writer has, in fact, betrayed Jimmy in the course of the retelling, we cannot be sure what it is we were not meant to know and why Jimmy wants to suppress it. In either case, the men wordlessly understand each other, and the reader is an outsider. Like Jake Barnes hungering impotently after Lady Brett, Jimmy continues to suffer from Martha's unattainability. As in the previous story, we are allowed to glimpse the gap between the mask and the face, the wounded man behind the masculine pose. But Martha is barely more than a plot device signifying Jimmy's life of virility and innocence destroyed by the war.
IV

If traditional manhood is tenuously constructed and tragically vitiated in these first two stories, it is ferociously reasserted in "How to Tell a True War Story." This story replays a version of the retribution scene first enacted after Ted Lavender's death. Again, the objective is deep compassion for the anguish and loss the men feel. And once more, male powerlessness is overcome through the repulsion of femininity. Here, though, the characters cope with lost innocence through explicitly misogynist reactions. It is as if the deeper men get "carried" into war (and the deeper we get into the book), the more they define themselves in opposition to the feminine.

The most self-reflexive story in the volume and the most confrontational toward the reader, O'Brien's narrative oscillates here between a core war story ("This is true"), stories within the story ("I had to make up a few things"), and aphoristic reflections on truth and fact ("A thing may happen and be a total lie; another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth"; "truths are contradictory"). The central story presented from several overlapping perspectives, concerns Rat Kiley's reaction to the sudden death by booby trap of his friend, Curt Lemon. Again, the medium of misreading is a letter—that important signifier of connection to "the world" in so much war literature. In his grief, Rat "pours his heart out" in a letter to Curt's sister: "So what happens? Rat mails the letter. He waits two months. The dumb cooze never writes back" (76). At this point, the narrator is paraphrasing Rat's language. In the metafictional section immediately following, the narrator ascribes the obscenity directly to Rat Kiley and analyzes it:

... you can tell a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil. Listen to Rat Kiley. Cooze, he says. He does not say bitch. He certainly does not say woman, or girl. He says cooze. Then he spits and stares. He's nineteen years old—it's too much for him—so he looks at you with those big sad gentle killer eyes and says cooze, because his friend is dead, and because it's so incredibly sad and true: she never wrote back. (76-77).

Stepping outside the story to give us a lesson in mimesis, the narrator's rationale for "obscenity and evil" is that he's simply telling it like it is, realistically rendering the soldier's idiom. Yet matter-of-fact description turns to sympathy, and then to blame, as he aligns himself with Rat while cautioning the uninitiated (implicitly female) reader: "If you don't care for obscenity, you don't care for the truth; if you don't care for the truth, watch how you vote. Send guys to war, they come home talking dirty." (Dirty, of course, means derogatory reference to the female body.) It turns out that Rat Kiley's propensity for aggressively sexist language is our fault. Within the story, the blame certainly lies with the sister: "The dumb cooze never writes back." He is excused, like Jimmy Cross and many other
characters, because he's "just a boy"—a recurring line throughout the book that manages to convey both irony and sympathy.

Retribution in this story gets played out against an image of suffering innocence—a "baby VC water buffalo"—which Rat Kiley slowly tortures by shooting it body part by body part until "Nothing moved except the eyes, which were enormous" (echoing the description of Rat's own "big sad gentle killer eyes"). The men stand by watching and then dump the baby buffalo into the village well, a symbol of devouring feminine sexuality as menacing as Jimmy Cross's tunnel. "We had witnessed something essential, something brand-new and profound, a piece of the world so startling that there was not yet a name for it" (86). Mitchell Sanders comments, "that's Nam ... Garden of Evil. Over here, man, every sin's real fresh and original." Such hyperbole makes for a good war story, but one might question whether such "evil" in a war is in fact anything new and why its discovery is always a revelation. In any event, the question of evil as a moral category is rendered moot by narrative commentary that insists in the amorality of war stories (this dialectic between Mitchell Sanders and the narrator is a continuing thread in the book): "If a story seems moral, do not believe it." Instead, we are asked to contemplate the "aesthetic purity of absolute moral indifference." War is presented as a self-contained, inevitable, a-political, and purely "essential" masculine reality; all the imagination can do here is play endless riffs on its themes and images. For Sanders, the "moral" is that "Nobody listens. Nobody hears nothin'. Like that fatass colonel. The politicians, all the civilian types. Your girlfriend. My girlfriend. Everybody's sweet little virgin girlfriend" (83). Such distinctions preserve the absolute dichotomy of masculinity and femininity and perpetuate a mystique of war that only male comrades can comprehend.

We might forgive Rat Kiley for being young, hurt, ignorant, and an unwitting product of his culture, as we are asked to forgive Jimmy Cross for being "just a boy." But as Lynne Hanley points out, the appeal to such sympathy, one recurrent strategy upholding masculine innocence in war literature, rests on "the idea that men go to war not really knowing that killing other people is what war is all about. And the story that keeps this idea alive and close to our hearts is the story of the soldier's tragic discovery on the battlefield that what he is a part of is killing. ... This fiction of the independent agency of war ... lifts the burden of guilt from the men who declare and organize war, as well as from those who actually carry the guns and drive the tanks and drop the bombs" (27, 29). Such an unraveling, however, does not seem to be O'Brien's intent. As in "The Things They Carried," recuperation of masculinity is achieved through the third-party mediation of a woman outside the war zone—first the sister who didn't write back, then the reader who doesn't listen. The coda complicates our response to the story's obscenity and reiterates hostility against women, who are categorically denied the ability to understand war. O'Brien deliberately calls attention to gender difference in this passage, putting the female reader in the uncomfortable
position of being told she has no hope of grasping the "true war story," let alone learning "how to write" it. Her reading up to this point is thus invalidated, and she is cast out along with Kathleen, Martha, and Sally, Curt Lemon's sister and the older woman at the reading:

Now and then, when I tell this story, someone will come up to me afterward and say she liked it. It's always a woman. Usually it's an older woman of kindly temperament and humane politics. She'll explain that as a rule she hates war stories; she can't understand why people want to wallow in all the blood and gore. But this one she liked. The poor baby buffalo, it made her sad. Sometimes, even, there are little tears. What I should do, she'll say, is put it all behind me. Find new stories to tell.

I won't say it but I'll think it.
I'll picture Rat Kiley's face, his grief, and I'll think, You dumb cooze.
Because she wasn't listening. (90)

The sole function of this postscript is to solidify the male bond and ridicule and reject the feminine, which it does with stunning hostility. The woman's "kindly temperament" and "human politics" are rendered naive and unrealistic; her sadness at the death of the baby buffalo is simplistic and sentimental; her "little tears" are diminutive, inappropriate. The narrator closes the male storytelling circle by appropriating Rat Kiley's obscene term to create his own bond with his comrade-characters and his male audience and to put distance between himself and his female reader. "A true war story," we are informed, is a "love story," which, according to this story, can only tell of love between men. The narrator asserts unequivocally in the last line that "a true war story" is "about sisters who never write back and people who never listen" (91).

V

Rat Kiley figures prominently again as the authoritative witness of the book's most disturbing story, "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong." Premised on an elaborately far-fetched "what if," the story unsettles and stretches our ability to suspend disbelief precisely because it is calculated to overturn conventional gender roles: suppose a soldier were to "ship his honey over to Nam ... import [his] own personal poontang." The absolute incongruity of having a woman enter the male sanctuary of war reinforces the extent to which culture constructs war as an all-male activity. The story counts on the reader's cognitive dissonance when faced with this image and trades heavily on its novelty and shock effect. As usual, O'Brien layers and fractures his narrative and mixes tones—strategies that mask the gender drama with a struggle over epistemological uncertainty and aesthetic indeterminacy. Framed by the narrator but close to Rat's perspective, the story follows Rat's effort to get it right, to "bracket the full range of meaning" for his incredulous friends. But Rat's story, part of which he heard second-hand and part
of which he experienced, comes with the narrator’s disclaimer that Rat has a reputation for “exaggeration and overstatement” and may be biased because he “loved her.” By the end, the story has the feel of a truth-is-stranger-than-fiction tale in the oral culture of soldiers—the kind of story usually punctuated at the end with the enigmatic “there it is.” Within the self-reflexive frame of the story, the actions Rat recounts for the narrator may or may not have happened; as always in this book, we are cautioned against looking for mimetic or factual truth and led toward accepting the emotional truth constructed by the imagination. To the interlocutors within the text, and to the narrator who is almost always complicit with his own characters, this has the ring of a “true war story” because it solidifies the masculine hegemony of war and casts out the monstrous woman who dares to appropriate masculine codes of behavior.

“Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” is further complicated by its literary self-consciousness, for it can be read as a gendered and perhaps parodic version of Heart of Darkness and its derivative retelling, Apocalypse Now—those explorations of the imperialist male psyche gone off the deep end. Here, inscrutable evil and cultural otherness are collapsed into the figure of a woman. The story is less concerned with what motivates the Kurtz figure, however, than with defending men’s homosocial bonds against all threat of feminine invasion. As in other Esquire stories, the figure of a woman is the other against which masculine identity and innocence are sympathetically defined. Here, though, the woman is distinctly not, as Rat points out, like “all those girls back home, how clean and innocent they all are, how they’ll never understand any of this, not in a billion years” (123). O’Brien’s ingenious twist is to create a woman who understands war because “she was there. She was up to her eyeballs in it.” Of course, being there and understanding war are only conceived in masculine terms—fighting—rather than any of the other roles women actually did play in Vietnam, for the masculine point of view prevails here. The story appears to be deconstructing gender difference by imagining a woman warrior, suggesting that even women can be corrupted by war. In fact, though, it portrays the woman as more masculine than the men, hence monstrous and unnatural. She can finally be tamed only within a masculine narrative. Characteristically, Rat gives the story a moral: “You come over clean and you get dirty and then afterward it’s never the same. A question of degree” (123). The “degree” to which people are transformed by war, however, turns on the difference of gender in this story. Gender difference temporarily blurs but ultimately gets resolved into the old oppositions, and women are warned against disrupting patriarchal order and assuming power assigned to men.

Rat’s story takes place at an obscure outpost where he once served as medic, a liminal place where the men are free to bend military rules, where basketball, beer, and easy camaraderie help pass the time between incoming emergencies. Beyond the medical station is a Green Beret base inhabited by six “Greenies,”
who are “not social animals.” This positioning is significant, for it begins to define “normal” and transgressive behavior in the story. The Greenies are associated with nature; Rat claims they were “animals ... but far from social.” Exuding an almost supernatural aura of power and authority, the special forces disappear and then “magically reappear, moving like shadows through the moonlight, filing in silently from the dense rain forest off to the west.” The medics keep their distance and “no one asked questions.” The base’s NCO, Eddie Diamond, sets the plot in motion with a “joke”: “What they should do, Eddie said, was pool some bucks and bring in a few mama-sans from Saigon, spice things up.” Mark Fossie, a young medic, is taken with the idea, saying that all it would take is “a pair of solid brass balls.” The phallic reference is reiterated when Eddie Diamond “told him he’d best strap down his dick.” Six weeks later, the men are astonished when Mark’s childhood sweetheart, Mary Anne Bell, shows up. After a heavy silence, someone says, simply, “That fucker.”

In the beginning, Mary Anne is represented as a parody of the all-American girl and “sweetheart” pin-up, both innocent and sexual. Seventeen and “just barely out of high school,” she shows up in “white culottes and this sexy pink sweater.” Rat dwells on the details of her appearance: “long white legs and blue eyes and a complexion like strawberry ice cream.” She and Mark dote on each other, sharing their American dream of a perfect house, a perfect family, a perfect future. They set up house “in one of the bunkers along the perimeter,” on the border between civilization and the Greenies’ wilderness. No mere sex symbol, however, Mary Anne has “a bubbly personality” and “a quick mind,” and she quickly develops an interest in the art of jungle warfare. Her interest is seen as naive at first, for she seems comically unaware of danger. Eddie Diamond comments, “D-cup guts, trainer-bra brains” but then warns ominously, “this girl will most definitely learn.” Unlike all the other women in the book, Mary Anne asks questions and listens carefully. Her interest, however, has nothing to do with strategy or politics. Clearly, she is stimulated by entry to a place both exotic and masculine, beyond the constrictive boundaries of conventional society: “The war intrigued her. The land, too, and the mystery.” In his description, which reveals a protective sort of love for Mary Anne, Rat simultaneously erases and calls attention to gender difference: “Like you and me. A girl, that’s the only difference, and I’ll tell you something: it didn’t amount to jack. I mean, when we first got here—all of us—we were real young and innocent, full of romantic bullshit, but we learned pretty damn quick. And so did Mary Anne” (108). Like Conrad’s dark continent, “Nam” is represented as an external force that changes innocent Westerners forever.

As Mary Anne “learns” about Vietnam, the narrator’s descriptions change from conventionally feminine to more masculine terms: she displays “tight, intelligent focus,” “confidence in her voice, a new authority in the way she carried herself.” Mark is first proud and amazed at her competence, then uncomfortable
and angry. "Her body seemed foreign somehow—too stiff in places, too firm
where the softness used to be. The bubbliness was gone. The nervous giggling,
too" (110). As in other stories, the male's confusion is explained by the fact that
he's "just a boy—eighteen years old" (111). Mary Anne starts helping out in the
operating room, learning how to fire an M-16, and eventually disappearing at
night. At first Mark thinks she's sleeping with someone else, but eventually dis-
covers the incredible fact that "Mary Anne's out on fuckin' ambush" with the
Greenies. When she first returns from such a mission, Mark "had trouble recog-
nizing her. She wore a bush hat and filthy green fatigues; she carried the standard
M-16 automatic assault rifle; her face was black with charcoal" (113), and from
this point on the narrative emphasizes how much she changes and how disruptive
these changes are to masculine identity and community. Mark temporarily re-
establishes patriarchal order by announcing their engagement, but when he starts
making arrangements to send Mary Anne home, she disappears for three weeks
into "that no-man's land between Cleveland Heights and deep jungle." When she
returns, it is as one of the shadows that "float across the surface of the earth, like
spirits, vaporous and unreal," disappearing into the Special Forces hootch. No
longer a "social animal," she is "lost" forever to Mark and his control, passing
over to the other side where hypermasculinity merges with the mysterious jun-
gle.

Mark becomes emasculated in inverse proportion to Mary Anne's increasing
autonomy, as if her transformation deprives him of his own traditional eighteen-
year-old initiation into manhood. He makes a final stand one day outside the Spe-
cial Forces area, telling Rat he'll "bring her out." By nightfall, "Fossie's face was
slick with sweat. He looked sick. His eyes were bloodshot; his skin had a whitish,
almost colorless cast." At midnight, Rat and Eddie Diamond find "the kid" trans-
fixed by a weird music "like the noise of nature" accompanied by "a woman's
voice ... half singing, half chanting. ... the lyrics seemed to be in a foreign
tongue" (118). The three men enter the hooch and find Mary Anne surrounded
by accoutrements of dark pagan worship: candles, tribal music with "a weird
depth-wilderness sound," and a "stench ... thick and numbing, like an animal's
den, a mix of blood and scorched hair and excrement and the sweet-sour odor of
moldering flesh—the stink of the kill." In one corner impaled on a post is "the
decayed head of a large black leopard." Everywhere there are "stacks of bones—
all kinds" and propped against a wall stands a poster: "ASSEMBLE YOUR OWN
GOOK!! FREE SAMPLE KIT!!" This scene invites comparison with Coppola's
almost camp representation of Kurtz's jungle compound, and one is not sure
whether to laugh at the special effects or take them as serious depictions of trans-
gression. In any event, when the men find Mary Anne, it is clear that her change
is complete. Not only is she no longer feminine, but she is no longer human, as
if a woman "perfectly at peace with herself" is no "person" at all, or no one the
men can recognize: "It took a few seconds, Rat said, to appreciate the full
change. In part it was her eyes: utterly flat and indifferent. There was no emotion in her stare, no sense of the person behind it. But the grotesque part, he said, was her jewelry. At the girl’s throat was a necklace of human tongues. Elongated and narrow, like pieces of blackened leather, the tongues were threaded along a length of copper wire, one overlapping the next, the tips curled upward as if caught in a final shrill syllable” (120).

The necklace of tongues conveys multiple meanings. It is linked with other references to Mary Anne’s entry to another language outside patriarchy: “a foreign tongue,” “a woman’s voice rising up in a language beyond translation.” It is clearly part of the animal, natural world, beyond social order. Like Medusa’s snakes, the necklace emphasizes an enforcing, stony silence. Mary Anne literally wears her own “gook” parts on her body, an image reminiscent of the more common string of ears collected as souvenirs by soldiers in many Vietnam war stories but more horrific, because they are decoratively flaunted. Tongues carry a multiplicitous sexual charge, suggesting both male and female genitalia, hetero- and homoerotic sexually. Her power is a particularly feminized form of monstrousness, a form of “jewelry” both alluring and threatening to castrate Mark’s “solid brass balls.” Once the men realize Mary Anne has transgressed the bounds of patriarchal propriety and order, “there was nothing to be done.” They leave her in her lair, but not before she is granted one soliloquy that in fact explains nothing to the men except her absolute inscrutability and animalism, the voracious death-loving maw she has become. To the reader—particularly the female reader—the passage inverts the book’s repeated pattern of blaming women for not understanding the war; here, the woman knows more than the men, and knowing is essentialized in terms of the female body:

‘You just don’t know’ she said. ‘You hide in this little fortress, behind wire and sandbags, and you don’t know what it’s all about. Sometimes I want to eat this place. Vietnam. I want to swallow the whole country—the dirt, the death—I just want to eat it and have it there inside me. That’s how I feel. It’s like … this appetite. I get scared sometimes—lots of times—but it’s not bad. You know? I feel close to myself. When I’m out there at night, I feel close to my own body, I can feel my blood moving, my skin and my fingernails, everything, it’s like I’m full of electricity and I’m glowing in the dark—I’m on fire almost—I’m burning away into nothing—but it doesn’t matter because I know exactly who I am. You can’t feel like that anywhere else.” (121)

Indeed, Mary Anne has entered the only place where female language, autonomy, sexuality, and power make sense—beyond culture into an untranslatable heart of darkness and horror. If a reading of the story stopped here, it might appear to be a feminist assertion of semiotic power disrupting patriarchal symbolic order, a deconstruction of the myths of the American sweetheart and the American Dream suggesting that we are all complicit in the fall from innocence into the “Garden of Evil” that is Vietnam. O’Brien sounds theoretically sophisti-
cated in such a passage, as if he's read plenty of French feminism. Rat himself sounds like a protofeminist in his commentary, once again appearing to erase gender difference while in fact emphasizing it: "She was a girl, that's all. I mean, if it was a guy, everybody'd say Hey, no big deal, he got caught up in the Nam shit, he got seduced by the Greenies. See what I mean? You got these blinders on about women. How gentle and peaceful they are. All that crap about how if we had a pussy for president there wouldn't be no more wars. Pure garbage. You got to get rid of that sexist attitude" (117). Aside from Rat's use of sexist language to critique sexism, it is important to note two things. First, Mary Anne's subjectivity, although given brief voice in the preceding passage, is never fully imagined. She is given no motive for her change and exists to register the men's reactions to her—both in the original story and in its retelling by both Rat and the narrator. Ultimately, what we understand about her is that the men do not understand her. Second, she ends up outside the social order altogether, "glowing in the dark" but also "burning away into nothing," her power unassimilated and ineffective: "And then one morning Mary Anne walked off into the mountains and did not come back." Unlike Coppola's Kurtz and Oliver Stone's Barnes in Platoon, ritualistically sacrificed because of their transgressions, she disappears into a disembodied spook story: "If you believed the Greenies, Rat said, Mary Anne was still somewhere out there in the dark ... She had crossed to the other side. She was part of the land. She was wearing her culottes, her pink sweater, and a necklace of human tongues. She was dangerous. She was ready for the kill" (125). O'Brien cannot imagine an ending for such a story; Mary Anne is never elevated to the level of tragic heroine, but remains a sort of macabre, B-movie "joke," good for a nervous laugh among the men. Ultimately, her change changes nothing.

In the end, social order is restored and male homosocial bonds are re-established, exchanged—according to Sedgwick's paradigm—through the medium of Mary Anne's story. Even the segregated medics and the Greenies come together, because the final installment of Mary Anne's story is passed from one of the Greenies and Eddie Diamond to Rat Kiley to the Tim O'Brien narrator. Through storytelling, the men close ranks and banish the woman beyond the periphery of civilization. Having appropriated masculine power within a female body, she is seen as "dangerous" to the social order and becomes "part of the land." The men are allowed to maintain their image of the war-making female as an aberration from the norm, but Mary Anne is denied the freedom or power to tell her own story. Unlike the ending of Apocalypse Now, where Kurtz's embrace of "the horror" brings about either total chaos or cathartic purgation (depending on which version you see), Mary Anne's savagery and monstrousness function to solidify male bonds and validate the humanity of the more "normal" soldiers. She carries to the furthest extreme the book's pattern of excluding women from the storytelling circle.
VI

In the story that closes the book, "The Lives of the Dead," O'Brien makes a turn toward wholeness, closure, and regeneration. Here, for once, the feminine occupies a position in the same precious realm of the imagination as the masculine, although alternating sections again keep the war stories, the childhood stories, and the present-day metafictional commentary separate. The imagination, which was so dangerously distracting in "The Things They Carried," is now a force that keeps the dead alive and integrates the self by mixing memory and desire, "bringing body and soul back together," unifying through the shaping force of language and narrative form, "a little kid, twenty-three-year-old infantry sergeant, a middle-aged writer knowing guilt and sorrow" (265). The narrator alternates in this story two primal experiences of death: his view of a Vietcong corpse on his fourth day in Vietnam, and his experience of love and loss at age nine. The story resurrects Linda, his fourth grade sweetheart, who died of a brain tumor. In retrospect, he imagines their first love as "pure knowing," imbued with the knowledge that "beyond language ... we were sharing something huge and permanent" (259). At this point in the book, the concept of merging wholly with another through "pure knowing" has accumulated the weight of fear (Jimmy Cross and Martha) and danger (Mary Anne and the war), both of which are also associated with transgressing normal gender codes and dissolving the socially constructed self. Here, the impulse seems to be to idealize youthful passion, distinguishing it from more frightening forms of grown-up "knowing." The narrator remembers that, in fact, his urge to tell stories has always been connected with resuscitating the dead. Grieving after Linda's death, he dreams of Linda coming back to comfort him: "Timmy, stop crying. It doesn't matter." In the months following, he begins to make up elaborate stories to bring Linda alive and call her into his dreams. He writes the stories down and in their vividness they become real. He gives Linda a voice (which of course is only his own dream voice, the feminine within himself) and imagines her expressing herself with a literary metaphor, once more reinforcing the connection between gender and writing/storytelling, with the female figured as absence: "'Well, right now,' she said, 'I'm not dead. But when I am, it's like ... I don't know, I guess it's like being inside a book that nobody's reading.'" The strategy stuck with him, for "In Vietnam, too, we had ways of making the dead seem not quite so dead." The most important way, the book makes clear, is to both read and write the dead by telling stories woven "in the spell of memory and imagination."

"The Lives of the Dead" reverses the book's opening story, "The Things They Carried," for here the imagination, linked with the memory of a girl, is not a dangerous force but is redemptive and regenerative. The story also moves beyond the antagonistic polarity of gender that marks the other Esquire stories. Linda is forever innocent and forever young, an idealized Laura or Beatrice or Annabel Lee who comes when hidden as muse for the narrator's cathartic stories. Although it
sounds ungenerous to critique such a moving and lovely story, one must wonder whether the book’s only positive and unthreatening representation of femininity is possible because she is forever pre-pubescent, safely encased in memory, dream, death, and narrative. Unlike Martha or Mary Anne or Curt Lemon’s sister, she never grows up to be a castrating “cooze” or savage monster. She never touches the war, thus never intrudes upon his homosocial bonds; rather, the narrator uses her, as male writers have always used female muses, to find his voice and arrive at his own understanding of his traumas. In the context of all the other war stories in the book, Linda still functions as part of a triangle; she is the mediator that facilitates the narrator’s reconciliation with his own past in Vietnam and his recovery of a whole self. It is tempting to read that self as universally human, but the force of the whole preceding book cautions us that it is a masculine self wounded in war and recovered in war stories. Woman can only play dead or absent muse to the central masculine subject.

The Things They Carried contributes significantly to the canon of Vietnam War fiction. It is a remarkable treatment of the epistemology of writing and the psychology of soldiering. It dismantles many stereotypes that have dominated Hollywood treatments of the Vietnam War and distorted our understanding: the basket-case veteran (the book’s narrator is reasonably well-adjusted), the macho war lover (characters such as Azar are presented as extreme aberrations), the callous officer (Jimmy Cross is fallible and sympathetic), the soldier as victim of government machinations, the peace movement, or apathetic civilians. The book probes the vulnerability of soldiers betrayed by cultural myths and registers how deeply war in our culture is a gendered activity. But O’Brien inscribes no critique of his characters’ misogyny or the artificial binary opposition of masculinity and femininity, no redefinition of power, no fissure in the patriarchal discourse of war. However ambiguous and horrible Vietnam may be, and however many new combinations of memory, fact, and imagination O’Brien composes, war is still presented as an inevitable, natural phenomenon deeply meaningful to the male psyche and hostile to femininity. More pernicious, these stories seem to warn women readers away from any empathetic grasp of “the things men do.” Feminist playwright Karen Malpede shares Tim O’Brien’s conception of the power of stories and the imagination, but she goes further to critique the very structures of thought and social organization that support war: “I mean quite literally that we need new rites, new myths, new tales of our beginnings, new stories that speak of new options open to us. The task before us is a task of the imagination, for whatever we are able to imagine we will also be able to become” (Gioseffi 132). Lynne Hanley echoes this idea, with a warning: “As a product of the imagination, literature has the potential to disrupt and transform the belligerent passions that permeate our culture. But literature also has its feet in the mud, and all too often our books, or our responses to them, encourage us instead to think bayonets” (35). Tim O’Brien’s imaginative flights are heady, but his exclusion of women as
readers and as characters finally reveals a failure of the imagination and muddy, clay feet.

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NOTES

1. Like Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, *The Things They Carried* is fueled by the problem of how to tell stories about unspeakable trauma and how to make peace with the ghosts of the dead. This comparison sheds light on how texts and narrative strategies are gendered. Morrison's narrative of "re-memory" circles around the central story in a complex interplay of voices and sub-stories; its impulse is generous, inclusive, and collective, aimed at regeneration for a whole community as well as Sethe and her traumatized family. For a fuller treatment of this idea in Morrison, see Linda Krumholz. O'Brien's stories, as I hope to show, deal with trauma and the threat to the masculine subject by excluding women, both as readers and as characters. Though storytelling often reinforces camaraderie and redeems the solitary narrator, it does not include a whole community traumatized by the Vietnam War, nor does it attempt, as Morrison's story does, to recover a collective repressed history.

2. For elaborations on the ways Vietnam War literature has worked to rehabilitate male veterans and masculinity, see Susan Jeffords, Jacqueline Lawson, and Lorrie Smith. Lynne Hanley explores female alternatives to "belligerent" narratives.

WORKS CITED


