

FROM HISTORICAL NARRATIVES TO TRAUMA NARRATIVES: UNIVERSAL  
REACTIONS TO SURVIVING THE VIETNAM WAR

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To the sons and daughters of those who witnessed, or participated in, the American war  
in Vietnam.

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## ABSTRACT

Regardless of nationality, culture, spirituality, ideology, or gender, survivors (including combatants and noncombatants) of war express the symptoms of combat trauma in undeniably similar ways. Veterans' Administration (VA) psychiatrist Dr. Jonathan Shay has noted the most destructive of these symptoms in the factual accounts of his Vietnam veteran patients. This thesis argues, though, that the same symptomatic manifestations recognized by Shay also appear with regularity in the fictional record of the Vietnam War. Foremost among these are a tendency to remain combat-ready; a reliance on misdirection and misrepresentation; and a dependency on drugs and alcohol.

More specifically, veterans may remain combat-ready by using combat survival skills, by seeing danger in their surrounding environment, and by viewing civilian life as a combat mission. Furthermore, survivors of war commonly use the tactics of misdirection and self-misrepresentation as a way to test—and keep at a distance—others. Additionally, survivors of the Vietnam War in the literature often abuse alcohol, use prescription and illicit drugs, or perform other more innocuous behaviors compulsively in order to escape from and/or provoke distressing memories of war.

Finally, this thesis argues that the common use of postmodern literary techniques among veteran and refugee authors can be best understood as yet another manifestation of combat trauma. Much of the literature of the Vietnam War is decisively postmodern in that it is distrustful of metanarrative and resists singular conceptions of identity. Furthermore, authors are often distrustful of the modern war narrative form and gravitate towards a more fractured approach to writing.

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## INTRODUCTION

In 2010, I completed an M.A. thesis entitled *Throwing Off the Dead: Psychological Combat Trauma and Healing among Vietnam Veterans* in which I considered some of the ways Vietnam veterans with combat-related psychological injuries relived defining aspects of their wartime traumas through anti-war protests, through participation in inherently dangerous activities and crime, and even through attempted and actual suicide, among other possible expressions of trauma. These moments of reliving trauma, I suggested, were very real attempts at reorganizing, communalizing,<sup>1</sup> and recovering from past hurts. Moreover, I traced what I saw as the main causes of psychological combat trauma. These initiators of injury, I claimed, started in war and extended into postwar attempts at healing.

However, I soon realized that my claims were incomplete and perhaps flawed. I did not at the time consider how a veteran's prewar experiences, identities, or moral injuries may have informed how he/she experienced certain wartime and postwar traumas. For example, for a veteran who was abandoned during his childhood by one or more parental figures, wartime abandonment (say a helicopter failing to respond to a call for a medical evacuation) and a postwar neglect (say the VA denying a requested disability rating) can be exceedingly devastating. In fact, such traumas may fuse and

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1. According to Veterans' Administration (VA) psychiatrist Jonathan Shay, "communalization" involves a three-step process: first, a veteran must create a narrative of his wartime experiences; second, the veteran shares his story of combat with a nonjudgmental and open listener(s); and third, the listener(s) internalizes and passes the story to a third party. This process thus allows for a previously-private, individual memory of hurt to become a collective human story in which all listeners share a sense of ownership. For Shay the process of "communalization" remains essential to achieving lasting recovery (Shay *Odysseus in America* 243-44).

overlap at different times. So, I now see that in order to understand a wartime trauma more fully, one must consider this injury as one that spans time and space and as one that may be remembered in multiple ways and with varying intensity. This view of combat trauma suggests that such wartime traumas cannot be reduced to combat alone. Perhaps Tim O'Brien articulates the fusing of traumas best through his character John Wade, the protagonist in the novel *In the Lake of the Woods*. Wade's memory of his father's suicide (a prewar traumatic experience) and his memory of the brutality at Thuan Yen (the novel's representation of My Lai) intersect in his mind. For example, after the war, Wade, in his own "dream-reels," sees himself as a boy at his father's funeral. He is somewhat confused, though, when he realizes that the funeral is taking place "in [the] bright sunlight along the irrigation ditch at Thuan Yen" (42). This is a clear example of the fusing of prewar and wartime traumas that oftentimes is best illuminated through fiction.

I remain interested in exploring the overlapping nature of combat trauma, and I believe authors' wartime memoirs and fictional works of the Vietnam War have expressed such a concept most fully and with profound insight. Though I can now see some possible flaws in my previous work, I can also recognize the ways in which my previous thesis research inspired me to pursue the topic of combat trauma by using an entirely different set of sources: the fictional literature of the Vietnam War. Such a source base provides certain perspectives that traditional, primary historical documents—say a military combat manual or a veteran's oral history, for example—simply cannot. And the thesis that follows is something of an interdisciplinary approach aimed at exploring how



and why survivors of war often express the symptoms of combat trauma through a collective, global “language” of sorts, which seems to span time and space.

More specifically, I am concerned here with describing a lexicon of combat trauma for both participants in—and witnesses to—war, regardless of nationality, ideology, gender, or religion. As I began to immerse myself in the fictional literature of the Vietnam War (considering works of both Vietnamese and American authors), I began to see many of the same expressions of combat trauma identified by VA psychiatrist Jonathan Shay in his American veteran patients emerge. As such, Shay’s works *Achilles in America: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* and *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming* provide theoretical frameworks for understanding the origins of combat trauma and the specific ways in which such trauma surfaces in postwar life. Shay has identified and shown how certain debilitating manifestations appear with regularity in the factual accounts of his Vietnam veteran patients; I will argue, though, that the same expressions of trauma arise, too, in the fictional accounts of the Vietnam War, for both veterans and refugees alike.

In conducting this research, I relied upon relevant works on Vietnam War literature and trauma theory. Among these, Mark Heberle’s *A Trauma Artist: Tim O’Brien and the Fiction of Vietnam*; Fred Turner’s *Echoes of Combat: Trauma, Memory, and the Vietnam War*; Dominick LaCapra’s *Writing History, Writing Trauma*; Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub’s *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*; and Cathy Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* are the most noteworthy. Each of these works has significantly shaped my understanding

of the Vietnam War, of trauma, and of the ways in which its survivors often remember and recount traumatic experiences on both collective and individual levels.

For Heberle, Tim O'Brien—one of the great American “war writers” of the twentieth century (an author who insists that he is not primarily a “war writer”)—often uses the Vietnam War as a site for exploring a larger theme of human trauma and its accompanying symptoms. The majority of O'Brien's work focuses on the Vietnam War (to some degree), but the war often becomes the medium through which O'Brien deconstructs and articulates more universal experiences of trauma. For example, *Northern Lights*, his first novel, in part describes the postwar life of an American Vietnam veteran, Harvey Perry (a combatant who suffered a traumatic physical injury in war); however, any traumas Harvey may have experienced supersede (in terms of importance in the storyline) the more universal, non war-related “troubles” of Paul Perry (Harvey's brother and nonveteran). As such, O'Brien's veteran and nonveteran characters' expressions of trauma may often seem to align themselves with more universal, non-combat-initiated manifestations of trauma, and such alignments remain paramount in terms of this study, as I am arguing for similar expression of trauma among *all* survivors of war. Heberle reminds us that O'Brien's works also often serve as “retrospective meditations or reflections by deeply traumatized figures trying to revisit the sources of their breakdowns so that they can recover themselves” (xxi). Moreover, Heberle suggests that such character reflections seem to mirror trauma therapy, in that characters—with varying success—seek to share (perhaps “communalize” or “work through”) their wounds with others in an attempt at recovery (xxi). O'Brien's depth of insight concerning trauma remains daunting. The “non-war-writer” identifies, through

fiction of course, many expressions of trauma that would not be noted by Shay until decades later. To reiterate, for Heberle, O'Brien's concern with exploring universal traumas more often than not outweighs his concern with accounting for the trauma(s) of Vietnam specifically, and O'Brien uses the subject of the Vietnam War (certainly a traumatic event) as a site for writing about the more general subjects of memory, trauma, and recovery.

Evoking Michael Herr's famous last lines in *Dispatches*—"Vietnam Vietnam Vietnam, we've all been there" (Herr 260)—Fred Turner sees the trauma(s) of the Vietnam War as existing on a collective, national level. He suggests that the collective, public memory of the war (shaped by the cultural "texts" living throughout American society, such as films, monuments, historical monographs, presidential speeches, etc.) makes all Americans worthy of uttering Herr's above statement (ix-x). U.S. citizens may say Herr's line with some level of authenticity, because many have seen and heard these expressions (monographs, documentaries, other cultural "texts") of the Vietnam War consistently throughout their lives. This interpretation becomes key here, as I will argue for a cohesive set of symptomatic psychological aftermaths of war trauma. Furthermore, for Turner, the Vietnam War served to traumatize Americans' beliefs in national myths and assumptions. And such a confrontation between myth and reality, for Turner, certainly shook the psychic ground upon which U.S. citizens have constructed their national identity (xiii). And similar to the origins of national trauma, such disruptions of internally held assumptions concerning the nature of the world and righteousness also often lie at the center of an individual soldier's wartime trauma.

In addition to relevant criticism on Vietnam War literature, several prominent works on trauma theory, narrative, and Freudian psychoanalysis also have guided my writing and thinking. More specifically, Dominick LaCapra, in *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, engages Freudian theory in order to identify the two main processes for remembering, communicating, and writing trauma. These two processes surface as either the “working through” or “acting out” of a past trauma. The process of acting out involves repeated, compulsive, and destructive acts (such as seeking danger, fighting, provoking others, and reckless driving) that may symbolically mirror a given traumatic experience; conversely, “working through”—the more desired course—involves the deliberate and controlled creation of a trauma narrative (141-44). Both of these processes (acting out and working through) exist throughout Vietnam War literature, and I will examine specific examples of both more fully in the chapters ahead. And the process of writing perhaps can often be in direct alignment with (or be viewed as a subset of) the process of working through.

Cathy Caruth, in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, similarly incorporates Freudian theory in her work, accounting for the ways in which a survivor of trauma often relives a traumatic experience repeatedly. At the center of her study is an interrogation of the Freudian term “traumatic neurosis” (“the unwitting reenactment of an event that one simply cannot leave behind”) (2). Caruth sees trauma not as a past event that has been survived and is thus over; rather, she conceptualizes trauma as the ongoing experience of *living* with and reliving trauma (7). Thus, as in the previous example of O’Brien’s John Wade, traumas may emerge as events that are

ubiquitous to the survivor and best envisaged as existing both in the past and present concurrently.

Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's study, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, has also informed my conceptualizations of combat trauma in a profound way. Similar to Caruth, Felman and Laub see traumas as having the ability to exist in simultaneous and constant states of occurrence and recurrence. As such, traumatic moments, for Felman and Laub, often may exist outside of normative understandings of time and space: "The traumatic event, although real, took place outside the parameters of 'normal' reality, such as causality, sequence, place and time. The trauma is thus an event that has no beginning, no ending, no before, no during, and no after" (69). Such a conceptualization of trauma helps to explain why survivors of war trauma (and trauma in general) often struggle with traumatic memories that occupy and perturb their daily existence. Yes, the event took place in the past, but it also has the ability to take place in the present with equal authenticity. And descriptions of wartime traumas in the literature of the Vietnam War demonstrate how past traumas are often inescapable in the present and surface again and again eternally, and many characters cannot seem to deconstruct, organize, account for, and compartmentalize their traumas as events that *happened* in the past and are now over with and done. In *Paco's Story*, Larry Heinemann provides an excellent example of a character who cannot separate his present civilian life from a past wartime trauma. Even the postwar job of washing dishes causes a past trauma to emerge powerfully in the present for Paco (a Vietnam War combat veteran who had sustained serious injuries in war and who was the only American survivor after the deadly attack on Fire Base Harriette). Therefore, the odors Paco smells as he cleans

the grease traps in the kitchen initiate for Paco a lucid memory of the smells of decay and death at Fire Base Harriette. So, in some way, the devastation of Fire Base Harriette is occurring every time Paco cleans the grease trap. It lives on in the kitchen around him as he works.

While relying on these critical works for a theoretical background, I will in this thesis attempt to make the case for shared displays of trauma among *all* survivors of war. As such, I am more concerned with tracing the similar expressions of combat trauma voiced by the Vietnamese and American combatants and by civilian survivors of the American war in Vietnam. Here I will argue that for participants in (combatants) and witnesses to (civilians) combat, trauma often manifests in undeniably similar ways, regardless of nationality, gender, religion, or ideology. This becomes most apparent in the literature of the Vietnam War, as American combatants, Vietnamese combatants, and Vietnamese refugees all seem to react to, adapt to, and depict the ordeal of surviving combat in virtually identical ways. And as stated previously, Veterans Administration (VA) psychiatrist Jonathan Shay's works *Achilles in America: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* and *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming* will provide theoretical frameworks for understanding the origins of combat trauma and the specific—and often debilitating—ways in which such traumas surface in postwar life. Paramount among these, in terms of this study, are four expressions of combat trauma that appear in the literature with resounding consistency: a tendency to remain in “combat mode”; a dependence by veterans and refugees on tactics of misdirection and misrepresentation; a reliance upon self-medication or compulsive actions or thoughts as a way to escape—or remember—war; and, in terms of authorial

style, a gravitation towards the postmodern style and a distrust of the linear, modern war narrative.

In illustrating the above claims, I will rely mainly on novels authored by American Vietnam veterans, Vietnamese veterans, and Vietnamese refugees living in America. Foremost among these novels will be Tim O'Brien's *In the Lake of the Woods* and *Northern Lights*, Larry Heinemann's *Paco's Story*, Stephen Wright's *Meditations in Green*, Bao Ninh's *The Sorrow of War*, Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge*, and Robert Olen Butler's *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*.<sup>2</sup> In addition to these novels, I will also consult several memoirs (Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War*, for example) to provide further context concerning both the American war in Vietnam and the above-described four expressions of war trauma. And in terms of my own writing methodology, I will incorporate examples from these above-listed literary works thematically throughout this thesis. More specifically, I will discuss elements of separate novels throughout differing chapters where relevant.

In the first chapter of this thesis, "Freud, Shay, and the APA: Trauma Theory and Understanding the 'Undoing of Character,'" I consider contemporary medical and psychiatric understandings and classifications of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as they apply to combat trauma. Of primary importance in this chapter will be the clinical description by the American Psychiatric Association (the APA) of PTSD and the symptoms that often accompany the post-combat condition. Additionally, I will buttress

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2. Butler is, of course, not Vietnamese, but he writes about Vietnamese refugees living in America, authentically depicting Vietnamese culture and the experience of being a refugee. Certainly Butler's time spent in Vietnam (as he is an American Vietnam veteran) has shaped his identity as a writer of Vietnamese culture. Moreover, *A Good Scent* is a collection of short stories rather than a cohesive novel.

the APA's conditioned evaluation of PTSD with Shay's seemingly more theoretical approach to understanding the origins of chronic psychological injury, which often involve a serious moral injury accompanying (usually directly preceding or following) a moment of trauma. (A detailed exploration of the term "moral injury" will, of course, be explored in chapter one.) Such an opening chapter, I believe, will serve as a helpful foundation, as I will use terminologies and concepts explored in this first chapter throughout the remainder of the thesis. Furthermore, I will include an analysis of the ways in which Freudian psychoanalytic theory informs current understandings of combat trauma and narrative. As such, I will include a detailed evaluation of several relevant concepts in the seminal works on trauma, theory, and narrative by Caruth, LaCapra, and Felman and Laub.

In the second chapter—titled "Cupping Cigarettes and Walking Point in Minnesota: Staying in Combat Mode"—I will examine the ways in which valuable wartime skills persist in civilian life even when their utility has disappeared. Shay's work *Odysseus in America* figures prominently in this chapter, as I use his conceptualization of the symptoms of PTSD ("The symptoms [of PTSD] can be understood in one clear and simple concept: persistence of *valid adaptations to danger* into a time of safety afterward") as the theoretical jumping-off point for exploring how instances of staying combat-ready emerge in fictional literature (149). In this chapter I will investigate the ways in which refugees and veterans alike manifest wartime behaviors in *Meditations in Green* and *The Sorrow of War*. Additionally, I will provide a detailed account of the significance of Harvey's postwar use of hand signals and his postwar decision to cover the glow of his cigarette in O'Brien's *Northern Lights*.



The third chapter, “The Reliance on *Metis*: Self-Protection through Misrepresentation and Misdirection,” will focus on the common tactic of veterans and refugees of war to test others through the use of sustained misrepresentation and misdirection. Survivors of war may employ such tactics to keep others at a distance as if to say, “I have been betrayed before. You may seek to hurt me in a similar way. So, I will test you continually before I trust you and allow you into my life.” Again, Shay’s theories will provide the foundation for my study here. He suggests combat veterans with psychological injuries may rely upon *metis* (cunning, trickery, deception) for moral protection and in order to test others (3, 14, 46-7). And like war veterans, refugees of war, I will argue, often use the same tactic in similar ways. For example, Mai (a Vietnamese refugee in Lan Cao’s *Monkey Bridge*) deliberately misdirects an American college interviewer so as to avoid feeling pressured to explain the realities of her life in Vietnam during the war. Similarly, during the same interview, Mai misrepresents the extent of her own past and memories of Vietnam to the interviewer. Mai, I will argue, misdirects and misrepresents in order to test the motives of the college interviewer and to protect herself and her own story.

The fourth chapter will focus on a common archetype found in the literature of the Vietnam War: the substance-addicted veteran. In this chapter—“Alcohol, Narcotics, and Cooking: Escaping and Reliving Trauma through Compulsive Behavior and Substance Abuse”—I will demonstrate how both veterans and refugees often overuse mind-altering substances (alcohol and drugs, for example) or compulsively perform certain behaviors (such as cooking) in order to achieve similar goals: either to distract themselves from—or re-immense themselves in—memories of war. Such a topic (soldier and veteran substance

abuse), though, continues to remain relevant in the historiography of the Vietnam War. For example, Jeremy Kuzmorov has argued that the image of the drug-addicted American soldier in Vietnam was, in reality, only a myth; drug addiction among U.S. soldiers in Vietnam, according to Kuzmorov, certainly was not widespread. Furthermore, he suggests that perhaps the administration of U.S. President Richard Nixon played a prominent role in spreading this false myth in order to blame American failings in Vietnam on addicted soldiers and not on faulty policies. Such findings, while important in reshaping how we remember and understand the actual war, do not preclude the possibility of widespread drug and alcohol use among veterans (and especially those veterans with psychological injuries) *after* the war. And here, in this thesis, I am more concerned with the postwar lives of the survivors of America's war in Vietnam.

In the fifth chapter, I will explore the preponderance of postmodern literary techniques in the writings of veterans and refugees of the Vietnam War. Many survivors of war trauma—due to what Shay identifies as a break in *themis* (internally-held conceptions of what is morally righteous)—often have difficulty trusting others in their postwar lives (Shay 150-51). And in this fifth chapter, “A Million Wars and a Million Postwars: The Distrust of Metanarrative and the Necessity for a Postmodern Style,” I will argue this inherent distrust even infiltrates itself into the narrative writing styles by which authors choose to communicate their stories. Most of the above-listed novels display decisively postmodern characteristics. Gone, it seems, is the trust in the conventional, linear narrative; instead, authors seem to identify the linear narrative format as a bankrupt form incapable of accounting for the multitude of *truths* surrounding their wars and memories. In exploring this gravitation towards the postmodern style, the theoretical

works of Linda Hutcheon, Michel Foucault, and Jean-Francois Lyotard will prove especially useful. In terms of this study, Lyotard's condensed definition of postmodernity ("Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity towards metanarrative") (qtd. in Natoli and Hutcheon 72-73) and Michel Foucault's contesting of "the unified and coherent self" (Hutcheon 11-12) will be of primary importance in showing how the postmodern *distrust* of metanarrative may be directly related to a war trauma-induced, broken capacity for social trust.

Finally, in a concluding section, I find it useful to consider the ways in which the experiences of contemporary veterans (from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars) and refugee communities (Kurdish and Syrian, for example) may mirror those of the trauma victims of the Vietnam War. Moreover, in this concluding section, I will introduce and consider an idea for future research in which I would compare the manifestations of trauma found in Vietnam War literature listed in this thesis to those expressions of trauma found in the emerging literature of the American wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In such a future research project, I would attempt to identify any major similarities and differences in the ways these differing sets of veterans and refugees communicate—and write about—wartime memories.

Veterans (again, both Vietnamese and American) and refugees seem to have much more in common than may have been previously hypothesized. In addition to expressing trauma in similar ways, both groups share a sense of a lost ability to return home: many veterans cannot return to the home they once knew, as both they and their homelands have changed inexorably, and refugees, of course, often risk persecution or worse upon attempting to return home. New waves of veterans and refugees are

continuing to come home to America. And a discerning look at the literature of the Vietnam War—as provided in the pages ahead—can help to inform this current situation.

## CHAPTER I

FREUD, SHAY, AND THE APA: TRAUMA THEORY AND UNDERSTANDING  
THE “UNDOING OF CHARACTER”

“Trauma” has become a rather widely used term in contemporary American society. The ubiquity of the term may be explained by the preponderance of traumatizing events in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries that have shaped America’s identity: the world wars, the Holocaust, the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the Vietnam War, and the attacks on 9/11, among others. These were profound events that many Americans experienced both individually and on a collective, national basis. The need for some sort of term to account for all of these troublesome occurrences, in part, explains the significance of “trauma” in the American lexicon.

But for all the uses of the term, trauma still remains a sort of shadowy signifier that evokes certain universal connotations while also resisting an easy articulation of meaning. In the following chapter, I will attempt to give readers a working, organizational definition of trauma and to clear away some of the figurative fog that often surrounds the term. More specifically, I will consider how several major, contemporary scholars and institutions have mapped out and conceptualized trauma and combat trauma. For the purposes of this chapter, I will limit my evaluation to the works of several prominent voices on trauma: VA psychiatrist Jonathan Shay; the critical trauma theorists Cathy Caruth, Dominick LaCapra, Shoshana Felman, and Dori Laub; and, of course, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV)*, a trusted medical reference manual published by the American Psychiatric Association (APA). And I will argue that for all the complexity of the term, all the scholarly and institutional definitions

of trauma seem to agree that the repetitive psychic reliving and re-experiencing of a trauma often surfaces as its most prominent symptom.

Perhaps the most useful place to begin this chapter, though, is with a brief consideration of the history and meaning of the shadowy term “trauma.” The word originally connoted a physical wounding, as the Greek term equated it with a wounding of the body. Modern medical and psychiatric literature has, though, understood trauma to signify more so a wound of the mind and not the body (Caruth 3). Cathy Caruth provides a most succinct and informative definition of how contemporary scholars and medical professionals often envisage trauma:

In its most general definition, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena. The experience of the soldier faced with sudden and massive death around him, for example, who suffers this sight in a numbed state, only to relive it later on in repeated nightmares, is a central and recurring image of trauma in our century. (11)

So not only has an historical shift from the body to the mind occurred in the situating of traumatic wounds, but also the repetitive reliving of trauma often occurs exclusively in the mind. But while the reliving of trauma often occurs in the metaphysical realm of the mind (in dreams or in intrusive thoughts), such relentless relivings of trauma often infiltrate and harm the body also. For example, psychological traumas easily manifest themselves in very real physical forms, such as drug abuse, insomnia, and chronic stress.

Moreover, combatants may often experience physical war wounds as psychological traumas in part. The loss of a limb is a very real physical injury, but the ordeal of surviving such an injury to the body can be exceedingly traumatic to the mind. So perhaps the term trauma should combine ancient and contemporary connotations to become a signifier that references a concurrent injuring of the mind *and* body.

But before exploring the ways in which modern-day scholars conceptualize trauma, it is necessary first to provide some context for the history of combat trauma—as this thesis focuses on trauma and war. And here I will suggest that the shifting, unstable terminology that professionals have applied to what we now commonly term

“post-traumatic stress disorder” (or PTSD)<sup>3</sup> reflects our continuing struggle to understand the full complexities of the condition. As Shay contends, Homer perhaps first most visibly identified—and accounted for—combat trauma in *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. In *Odysseus in America*, Shay argues that *The Odyssey* may be “read as a detailed allegory of many a real veteran’s homecoming” (xv). So, in light of such a reading, Odysseus might have actually returned to Ithaca immediately after the Trojan War, which would recast the literary narrative of his near ten-year journey home as a “lost homecoming” in which he was psychologically home but psychically lost. Once home, Odysseus’

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3. In this thesis I have chosen to use the term “PTSD” sparingly. I believe, when applied to combat trauma, the term is somewhat inaccurate, limiting, and misleading. The term (when connected to combat trauma) leads to a tendency to reduce psychological combat injuries to a four-letter abbreviation and to group combat trauma and its manifestations with all other forms of traumas. And while combat trauma and other traumas (such as sexual abuse or surviving a horrific car crash, among others) often share defining attributes (such as some sort of violation of righteousness or trust), it seems as though combat trauma—or war-induced trauma—is, in several ways, unique in origin and eventual postwar expression. For example, an injured veteran may remain combat ready or experience a combat flashback in ways inseparable from previous combat experiences and military life. Additionally, national institutions (or individuals who represent and embody these national institutions) or myths—not individual citizens—often are responsible for a given violation of righteousness and of expected world ordering. As such, I believe the postwar condition that often accompanies severe combat trauma(s) deserves a more specific, universally-accepted label. It remains too easy to just write or say “PTSD” when referring to combat trauma—or any trauma for that matter. Moreover, the ‘D’ (Disorder) in PTSD may suggest a veteran’s mind is lacking in order and that the injury was an inherent part of a veteran’s psyche and not an injury acquired in combat. If one must rely on the terminology of the APA’s 1980 publication, perhaps one should substitute a ‘C’ (Condition) for the ‘D.’ Finally, I have learned recently not to dismiss the term “PTSD” completely, as in certain domains and situations it has serious power. PTSD is the accepted terminology of the VA, of most mental health professionals, and of many injured veterans and their families. The term and diagnosis (which can often lead to needed treatment and financial support) often make a veteran’s injury real and finally “seen” by others. For this thesis, I will, however, rely for the most part on Shay’s terminology of “combat-related psychological injury.” However, in some instances, PTSD is also appropriate.



psychological injuries from war make him something of a ghostlike figure who though home is yet in many ways absent and stuck battling his internal “monsters” (addiction, guilt, memories of war, etc.). We see such ghostlike figures with alarming frequency in the literature of the Vietnam War; Larry Heinemann’s Paco, for example, would certainly qualify.

In view of America’s wars,<sup>4</sup> the one constant in the terminology applied to combat trauma has been its inconsistency: during the Civil War, “soldier’s heart” became a common appellation for the condition; the mechanized, industrialized warfare of World War I (WWI) produced the term “shell shock”; medical professionals after WWII identified something of an epidemic of “combat fatigue”<sup>5</sup> (Wizelman 1-2); while Americans were still fighting in and returning from Vietnam, the term “post-Vietnam syndrome” became popular; and in 1980, responding to the high number of distressed soldiers returning from Vietnam, the American medical community recognized—and labeled—the post-combat condition officially in its *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* as PTSD. So it seems the language and the meanings Americans ascribe to the condition change after most “large-scale” conflicts. As such, I predict that the terminology and its meanings will undoubtedly change again—and soon. (How such

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4. This is not to suggest that no significant developments occurred in the understanding or articulation of combat trauma between the Trojan War and the American Civil War; rather, in terms of this study, the changes in perception that occurred in the twentieth century emerge as most noteworthy.

5. During the Korean War, the U.S. military was more concerned with preventing such “fatigue” in combat through pre-training screening for soldiers with “strong” psychological attributes. For more context on the Korean War, see Joel Osler Brende and Erwin Randolph Parson, *Vietnam Veterans: The Road to Recovery*. New York: Plenum Press, 1985. 69. Print.

a shift will occur, though, is not a concern here.) Shay suggests that the phrase “combat-related psychological injury” is more appropriate than the generic term, PTSD; his linguistic label separates the postwar condition from a mental disorder and makes it clear that the condition’s origins are directly related to a very real wartime injury (analogous to a physical wound).

Jonathan Shay’s groundbreaking theories evolved from very real exchanges with Vietnam veteran patients who suffer from chronic PTSD. Perhaps the best place to begin a consideration of Shay’s theories on the origins and manifestations of combat trauma is with his view of how the *Iliad* may be read as a metaphor for PTSD, especially how Odysseus’ comrade Achilles obtained his most significant, moral war wounds. After Achilles displayed courage and heroism in battle, his Greek comrades voted to award their hero a prize of honor in the form of the captive woman, Briseis. Soon after, however, Agamemnon (king and military commander of the Greeks) dishonored and humiliated Achilles publically by seizing his promised award. And this was, in ancient warfare, a serious—and public—violation of both the accepted and trusted military moral order and of what was known to be righteous. Shay compares this to a modern-day occurrence of a military commander taking a soldier’s hard-won Medal of Honor simply because he, the commander, wanted such a commendation for himself (*Achilles in Vietnam* 6). To reiterate Shay’s hypothesis, when Agamemnon took Achilles’ prize, the commander broke an accepted moral contract or code; the act thereby amounted to a direct violation of *themis* (‘what’s right’) that weighed the hero down with rage (*menis*).

Achilles’ character and fighting spirit (*thumos*), as Shay argues, then continued to become “undone.” Before addressing how similar events occurred in the Vietnam War,

however, it is necessary to point out that while breaks in *themis* can emerge in many different forms, the one uniting factor found in all such breaks remains a violation of what is accepted as morally righteous. For example, Shay suggests that weapon and equipment malfunctions,<sup>6</sup> overtly dehumanizing mission objectives or tactics, failures by command to provide quick and needed rescue, cases of friendly fire, and orders that result in the killing or injuring of non-combatants can all lead to violations of *themis*.

So for Shay, violations of *themis* may injure (or “undo”) a soldier’s *thumos* (fighting spirit, character, heart), and this injured *thumos* often materializes in the form of a veteran’s lost capacity for social trust in postwar life. After such a violation, an injured veteran likely may no longer trust that “power will be used in accordance with ‘what’s right.’” And injured veterans may then respond to this lack of social trust (or destroyed ability to trust) with a vigilant need to protect themselves from similar moral violations or injuries: “When social trust is destroyed, it is not replaced by a vacuum, but rather by a perpetual mobilization to fend off attack, humiliation, or exploitation, and to figure out other people’s trickery.” And such perpetual mobilization, according to Shay, becomes

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6. In a 2003 interview with Kurt Jacobsen, Larry Heinemann communicated how mechanical malfunctions and inconsistent and inadequate military equipment can evoke rage among soldiers both during combat and many years later. The M-16 rifle, the standard issue rifle for the majority of ground soldiers in Vietnam, was notorious for jamming. In addition, the “inch and half aluminum alloy armor plate” of Heinemann’s armored vehicle in Vietnam could not protect against rocket-propelled grenades. And equally dangerous, these vehicles commonly housed a ninety-gallon tank of gasoline directly behind the driver’s seat. In speaking about the M-16, Heinemann said, “If I ever run into the motherfucker that sent that rifle overseas, I’m going to make short work of him.” A similar anger arose when speaking of the dangers of gas-powered tracks (tanks): “I ever run into the fucking genius who sent gas-powered to Vietnam, he and I are going to have a serious discussion. I would gladly do time in prison for the chance of showing Mr. Genius what I think of his scheme.” “Larry Heinemann in Conversation with Kurt Jacobsen,” *Logos* 2 no.1 (2003): 148-49.

debilitating in postwar life and robs injured veterans of a “flourishing human life” (*Odysseus in America*, 151).

While this breaking of *themis* is the most destructive aspect of psychological combat wounds (in the sense that it can lead to a life of continual mistrust, isolation, and an inability to form lasting, meaningful relationships—essentially a forever lost homecoming) and a central concern of this study, it is not the only major cause of combat-related psychological injury. Certainly, as the APA has identified in its *DSM-IV*, direct exposures to death or injury or serious threats to one’s own physical security (or as the *DSM-IV* puts it, “direct personal experience of an event that involves actual or threatened death or serious injury, or threat to one’s physical integrity”<sup>7</sup>) can by themselves cause PTSD symptoms to emerge in postwar life (APA 464).

In addition to these precursors of PTSD—or combat-related psychological injury—the following experiences can all independently or collectively combine with a violation of *themis* to cause life-long injury: prolonged exposure to fear, feeling responsible for the loss or injuring of a close comrade, continual discomfort, a lack of control during combat, an inability to fight back, and the general exposure to the horrors of war (Buchanan 15-75). And when such traumatic combat experiences precede or follow violations of ‘what’s right,’ psychological injury may easily become life-long and debilitating. (This is certainly the case for many of the characters in the fictional record of

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7. Yes, this is a valid understanding of the causes of what the APA labels PTSD, but it omits the most defining initiator of complex combat-related psychological injury: some sort of a violation of ‘what’s right.’ Whenever I read the APA’s “or threat to one’s physical integrity,” I always ask, “What about a threat to one’s moral integrity?”

the Vietnam War, as many saw or participated in—to varying degrees—violence, loss, and destruction.)

Like the initiators of (or causes of) serious, combat-related psychological injury, the postwar manifestations of (or symptoms of) combat can surface in exceedingly complex ways. According to the *DSM-IV*, the symptoms of PTSD are quite numerous, including a re-experiencing of the traumatic event in the form of nightmares, flashbacks, or intrusive thoughts; difficulty in falling and staying asleep; difficulty concentrating; increased startle response; a general avoidance of situations and “stimuli” that may conjure memories of trauma; and feelings of increased anger or irritability (APA 464). But as Shay makes apparent, all of these above symptoms fall under one all-encompassing definition of “simple” PTSD: “the persistence into civilian life of adaptations that allowed the veteran to survive in combat” (*Odysseus in America* 97). Essentially, these symptoms of ‘simple’ PTSD emerge as continued postwar attempts at ensuring self-survival and safety; these manifestations of trauma may serve to prevent another similar trauma by allowing an injured veteran to anticipate, prepare for, and avoid similar injuries.

But Shay also makes sure to distinguish “simple” PTSD from “complex” PTSD. He argues that the destruction of trust that often accompanies a violation of *themis* is the defining factor that separates “simple” from “complex” PTSD. The symptoms of “complex” PTSD include those of “simple” PTSD (the “persistence of valid adaptations to danger into a time of safety afterward”) in addition to a shattered capacity for social trust (*Odysseus in America* 4, 149). According to Shay, veterans can usually recover from simple PTSD, but when PTSD is complex in form, it can become chronic and severe.

Shay writes, “I shall argue what I’ve come to strongly believe through my work with Vietnam veterans: that moral injury is an essential part of any combat trauma that leads to lifelong psychological injury. Veterans can usually recover from horror, fear, and grief once they return to civilian life, so long as ‘what’s right’ has not also been violated” (*Achilles in Vietnam* 20). So if a veteran experiences breaks in the standard moral order of what is known to be righteous as well as moments of violence, death, or injury, a prolonged, postwar cycle of mistrusting others and institutions may ensue, and as a result, the potential for recovery may become bleak—but definitely not impossible.

Whereas the behaviors of combatants with PTSD may ensure protection from future combat trauma, they invariably prohibit many veterans from reintegrating into civilian life successfully. For example, a veteran who walks the perimeter of his house throughout the night—every night—to make sure his home is safe from potential attack or ambush certainly will likely prevent a robbery and ensure the physical safety of his family and self. But the same action—which is undeniably a continuation of combat actions into civilian life—may cause family members to lose sleep, may cause embarrassment for the veteran when he cannot explain his nightly patrols to his family and friends successfully, and may cause the veteran to miss work or family functions due to a lack of sleep.

According to Shay, the wartime narrative of Achilles may serve, in part, as an example of how chronic combat PTSD may surface. Achilles experienced both exposures to death and injury (killing numerous soldiers and heroes from Troy and witnessing numerous deaths of Greek combatants too) *and* a break in *themis*. These occurrences thereby collided and weighed down the warrior with what modern mental health

professionals would likely label and diagnose as complex—or chronic—PTSD. But what makes Achilles’ combat narrative equally fascinating and illuminating for this study is that it helps account for two other defining causes of combat-related psychological injury: the death of *philos* (a close comrade) and a moment of dishonor or humiliation. When Hector (the hero of Troy killed by Achilles) kills Patroklos, Achilles loses a true *philos* (a close comrade and brother-in-combat).<sup>8</sup> A profound grief strikes Achilles, and he begins to feel or wish that he were already dead. In fact, direct references to self-mutilation and suicide on the part of Achilles exist in *The Iliad*. In response to hearing the news of Patroklos’ death, Achilles tears at his own hair, and Antilokhos (Greek soldier and comrade of Achilles) has to intervene to stop Achilles from cutting his own throat:

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8. In combat, a very real love often forms between soldiers. On several occasions, Philip Caputo, in *A Rumor of War*, describes the love that often existed between soldiers in Vietnam. This love, for Caputo, was profound. Not only do soldiers often share a sense of sacrifice and suffering, but they also may live together through—and with—death and injury. Additionally, many soldiers were willing to risk their lives in order to save a fellow warrior. Even in death, such love still existed, as Caputo describes how soldiers—on occasion—would even run back into fire to retrieve the bodies of fallen comrades (*A Rumor of War* xvii). In a war that was slowly deteriorating the ideals—and perhaps morality—of American soldiers, the love between soldiers oftentimes remained the only thing that kept them fighting and surviving. When and if this love is shattered (through the loss of a fellow warrior or through an experience of betrayal, for example), moral devastation can result. Such an “atrocious” may forever change a soldier’s perceptions of love.

Shay has considered many injured veterans’ difficulties in achieving meaningful and lasting love in their postwar lives. He argues that many veterans may compare their postwar emotions and relationships to those experienced in combat. Oftentimes, these postwar feelings and emotions lack the intensity of their wartime counterparts. This may lead a soldier to discard or undervalue a postwar sensation of love or a postwar relationship. If a veteran accepts and embraces a powerful postwar feeling of love, he may feel as though he is somehow betraying his wartime feelings of love. And if a veteran discards these powerful wartime memories of love, he may ultimately feel as though he is somehow forgetting the memory of a fallen soldier. The soldier may thereby feel he is losing his deceased brother-in-arms once more. Such pain, of course, would be unbearable.

A black stormcloud of pain shrouded Akhilleus [Achilles].

On his bowed head he scattered dust and ash  
in handfuls and befouled his beautiful face,  
letting black ash sift on his fragrant khiton.

Then in the dust he stretched his giant length  
and tore his hair with both hands. (*Iliad* 18.30)

From the hut the women who had been spoils of war to him  
and Patroklos flocked in haste around him,  
crying loud in grief. All beat their breasts,  
and trembling came upon their knees. (*Iliad* 18: 34)

Antilokhos wept where he stood, bending to hold the hero's  
hands when groaning shook his heart: he feared  
the man might use sharp iron to slash his throat.

And now Akhilleus gave a dreadful cry. (*Iliad* 18: 38)

This is not to say that the death of a *philos* leads to suicide or self-mutilation attempts in all soldiers; instead, the act seems to account figuratively for the depth of grief felt after such a loss and also shows how such a moment may move soldiers closer to death—or at least closer to the thought of wishing they were dead. Vietnam veterans—or any combat veterans for that matter—who lost a comrade in battle may suffer from similar forms of grief and survival guilt. They may replay the moment of loss over and over in their minds, thinking, “If I had only done this or that, he would still be alive.” In addition, a



soldier may grapple continuously with the question, “Why did I survive when others died?”

In addition to a loss of *philos*, dishonor and humiliation can also tear away at a veteran’s character and result in serious wounds. And such moments of dishonor and humiliation, it seems, often overlap. Certainly, Achilles felt humiliated when Agamemnon publically took Briseis. And, of course, the confiscation was dishonorable in nature, amounting to a violation of *themis*. According to Shay, dishonor and humiliation can lead to despair and anger and “arouse the desire to kill—self or others” (*Odysseus in America* 95).<sup>9</sup> Humiliation and dishonor emerged with similar devastating consequences during the Vietnam War era. For example, one of Shay’s former patients, “Doc,” committed suicide shortly after the VA denied his claim for a combat PTSD disability pension. This denial dishonored and humiliated “Doc” by essentially—and officially—devaluing his sacrifice, service, and injury (*Odysseus in America* 94-95).

Such causes of psychological injury are, of course, demonstrable, as Shay has argued, in both the combat narrative of Achilles *and* the combat narratives of American soldiers who fought in Vietnam. In a sense, Shay has suggested that Vietnam is analogous to Troy, along with its own modern Homeric (American) warriors and commanders. And the injuries these modern and ancient warriors inflicted and sustained were in many ways inseparable. Following Shay’s metaphor, America seemed to become

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9. This occurrence may help to account for the hypothesis included by Tim O’Brien in *In the Lake of the Woods* that concludes that John Wade brutally killed his wife by pouring boiling hot water directly on her head. The recent political loss Wade suffered (due to a public uncovering of his implication in atrocity and an accompanying public questioning of his character) may have served as a very real moment of humiliation and dishonor. And such devastating feelings may have incited his hypothesized murderous actions.

a land inhabited by thousands of lost Odysseuses in the decades following the Vietnam War. But these Odysseuses were also destined to emerge among the fictional literature of war. Additionally, these Odysseian figures were not all American: Vietnamese veterans and refugees living in Vietnam and the U.S. also figuratively came to embody the infamous lost Greek warrior.

Shay has deconstructed the most powerful initiators of chronic psychological injury; moreover, he has identified some of the most potentially destructive ways in which traumatic injuries surface and resurface in postwar life. But Shay has not been the only contemporary scholar to provide valuable insight into the effects of trauma. Dominick LaCapra, in *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, borrows from Freudian theory to explain the two primary processes by which survivors of traumatic events often communicate their injuries later in life. Freud identified these two processes as the “working through” and “acting out” of past traumas. Working through remains the ideal, preferred method and involves creating critical distance from a traumatic experience by, in part, constructing a deliberate, detailed inventory of the past. Acting out, however, emerges as a result of an active (or unintentional) psychic denial of trauma. And such denials often materialize as destructive compulsive repetitions of traumatic scenes in which the compulsive act being displayed often symbolizes or mirrors the denied trauma (141-44). The “working through” process is preferable, though, because as LaCapra notes, it may allow for a trauma survivor to think or say, “Yes, that happened to me back then. It was distressing, overwhelming, perhaps I can’t entirely disengage myself from it, but I am existing here and now, and this is different from back then” (LaCapra 144).

Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub have also recognized the importance of “transmitting” a traumatic story through verbal communication. One practical outcome of the verbal diffusion of a trauma narrative is that it, of course, allows an outlet for the survivor (or “testifier”) to share his/her narrative with an active listener. But more importantly, the testifier will begin to hear and *listen* to his/her own story actively (possibly hearing it out loud for the first time). This self-listening may give life to a forgotten memory or detail, which may serve to provide context or to make the narrative less fragmented and threatening (71).

While the working through process is valuable, such an open sharing of trauma has the potential to devastate both sharer and listener. And this possible harmful result of communicating a narrative helps to account for the silence of many combat veterans: they fear their stories could hurt or traumatize others. Shay describes this “secondary traumatization” as including also a profound sense of “shame and remorse for how the lives of their wives, parents, and children have been deformed by the impact of their own psychological and moral injuries” (*Odysseus in America* 83). For Felman and Laub, though, the risks of “witnessing” another’s trauma may also cause a sort of existential crisis for the listener:

Even when the listener—in his capacity as a psychoanalyst—is trained by discipline and by his profession to treat trauma and to be its witness, the experience of the witnessing—of the listening to extreme limit experiences—entails its hazards and might . . . suddenly—without warning—shake up one’s whole grip on one’s experience and life. (xvi-xvii)

Moreover, the listener (and possibly the reader also)—through the witnessing of a trauma narrative—must thereby acknowledge his/her own mortality and the potential emptiness and the possible meaninglessness of life:

The listener can no longer ignore the question of facing death; of facing time and its passage; of the meaning and purpose of living; of the limits of one's omnipotence; of losing the ones that are close to us; the great question of our ultimate aloneness; our otherness from any other; our responsibility to and for our destiny; the question of loving and its limits; of parents and children; and so on. (72)

In addition to noting the importance—and possible dangers—of sharing trauma narratives, scholars have also recognized the centrality of the body in relation to injuries of the mind. LaCapra provides valuable meditations concerning how psychological trauma often surfaces in the body. He sees the body and the language of the body as being powerful mediums through which traumas may surface: “The looks and gestures of survivors also call for reading and understanding. At times nothing could be more graphic and significant than the body language, including facial expressions, of the survivor-witness in recounting a past that will not pass away” (xiv). One example of such a gesturing of trauma would be the image of the war veteran with the 1,000-yard stare. More specifically, though, the actual bodies of veteran and refugee characters emerge as sites for trauma throughout the literature of the Vietnam War. For example, Paco's scars, leg and back injuries, grimaces, and 1,000-yard stares serve, in part, to show some of the ways in which psychological trauma surfaces through the body. Additionally, Harvey's missing eye (in *Northern Lights*) and Thanh's burn scars (in *Monkey Bridge*) function in

a similar capacity. Such physical injuries, scars, broken gaits, or missing limbs are seemingly ubiquitous throughout the literature. They serve as both physical reminders of war and also as very real metaphors for the potential of psychological trauma to continue on into postwar life—perhaps further marking the veteran as “other.”

Most—if not all—of the origins and expressions of trauma considered in this chapter—as identified by Shay, the APA, Caruth, LaCapra, Felman, and Laub—exist, I will argue in the following chapters, throughout the fictional writings of the Vietnam War. Combat soldiers may not be the only ones in a war-zone to witness a violation of *themis* or the death of a close companion. Civilians who lived through war and who lived through the ordeal of exile also often share such similar hurts. For example, escalating violence and warfare sometimes forced a Vietnamese family to leave behind a beloved family member (this occurs in Lan Cao’s *Monkey Bridge*). And such a loss may be internalized in ways that parallel Achilles’ loss of Patroklos. Furthermore, the symptoms of PTSD as listed above seem to emerge for both veterans and refugees in similar ways.

What follows is an examination of several of these striking similarities in the manifestations of combat trauma for all direct witnesses to war, regardless of nationality, gender, culture, and ideology. And before proceeding any further, it may be useful to construct here a working, organizational definition of trauma that combines parts of the theoretical work on trauma considered previously in this chapter. So for this thesis, when I write about the occurrence of a wartime trauma, I am referring specifically to some sort of a witnessing of physical injury, a physical destruction, an extreme act of violence, or a death combined with (preceding or following) a moment of moral injury (most commonly some sort of break in *themis*). Moreover, when I write in reference to the

lasting psychic consequences of surviving a wartime trauma, I am defining—and referring to—trauma as an inability to separate a past moment of hurt (psychological) from the present; a tendency to relive (or act out) a past moment of hurt/betrayal over and over again symbolically and psychically; and the tendency of a survivor of war to rely on—and perhaps overuse—needed wartime adaptations and survival skills in postwar life. Perhaps the most visible and overt examples of the symptoms of combat trauma manifesting in postwar life emerge in the form of veterans and refugees continuing to engage in combat-survival behaviors upon their return home. The following chapter investigates the postwar continuation of combat-survival behaviors.

## CHAPTER II

CUPPING CIGARETTES AND WALKING POINT IN MINNESOTA: STAYING IN  
COMBAT MODE

Why would a veteran hide the glow of his cigarette, use silent hand signals, or conduct nightly patrols *after* returning home from war? Why would a war refugee avoid hospital windows in her postwar life? Such behaviors seem to be illogical and irrational in a time of peace, but these same actions are linked closely in combat. As Jonathan Shay suggests, all postwar manifestations of combat trauma can be best understood as combat actions that allowed for survival throughout combat and traumatic moments persisting into civilian life after war (97, 149). But other adaptations to combat also often emerge in life after combat: sustained isolation, an inability to sleep, a “hyperactive startle response,” and a reliving of traumatic events in dreams, flashbacks, or intrusive thoughts (Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*, xx, 165-67). All these actions can be understood as learned skills that secured safety and survival in combat yet simultaneously undermine the ability to achieve a physically and socially healthy civilian life. But perhaps the most obvious form of an “adaptation to danger persisting into a time of safety afterward” (Shay, *Odysseus in America*, 149) occurs when veterans—or refugees for that matter—quite literally display combat behaviors in civilian life. Essentially, a veteran may remain in combat mode (Ibid. 19-34). This is not to suggest that these veterans carry rifles or call in coordinates for artillery airstrikes—although sometimes during flashbacks some veterans with serious and complex psychological injuries do relive a wartime memory in which they are actually acting out a moment of combat. Trauma reactions are often more subtle. Nevertheless, while some of these instances of remaining combat-ready in a time of

peace can be relatively harmless, they all, if noticed by others, further the gap between those who have lived and survived in a warzone and those who did not.

In this chapter I will examine specific instances in which characters—to varying degrees—stay in combat mode into their civilian lives. Moreover, I will divide these examples of staying in combat mode into two subcategories: combat survival skills persisting into civilian life and combat distrust of others and the surrounding environment carrying over into postwar life. First, I will consider certain adaptations to combat that follow veterans home from war that take the form of characters displaying subtle, learned wartime survival skills, such as communication or ambush skills (hand signals or shielding the glow of a cigarette, for example). Secondly, I will examine how civilian survivors of war may—like their veteran counterparts—remain combat-ready after the war has ended, seeing the potential for wartime destruction and danger in the most innocuous of settings. In the third part of this chapter, I will investigate how veterans may remain in combat mode by treating civilian tasks and work responsibilities as combat missions. And in a concluding fourth section, I will discuss if and how—and in what ways—instances of staying combat-ready intersect with the two main Freudian processes of remembering and communicating trauma: “acting out” and “working through.”

### Staying in Combat Mode: Survival Skills

A work that clearly illustrates a survivor of war manifesting wartime survival skills is Tim O’Brien’s first novel, *Northern Lights* (published in 1975 after his wartime memoir, *If I Die in a Combat Zone*). In the novel, Harvey Perry, a Vietnam veteran,



returns home to Minnesota and to his brother, Paul. The reader soon learns that Harvey—like many veterans—hesitates to talk about his wartime experiences and has suffered some kind of mysterious, unexplained injury, returning home with only one eye. In fact, O'Brien reveals that the reason Harvey resists speaking of his war wound ostensibly because is that he cannot remember exactly how he sustained it:

Harvey: "Did you know I lost an eye over there? Do you know how it happened?"

Paul: "No."

Harvey: "Me neither. Turn the bloody light off. Can't even remember. Everything was so dark, cow shit and mildew." (143)

But while Harvey may not remember the circumstances of his injury, he remembers certain wartime combat and survival skills instinctively. Harvey always remains combat-ready.

On several occasions throughout *Northern Lights*, Harvey displays and relies upon actions that could have saved lives in combat in Vietnam, but in civilian life these same actions seem unnecessary or irrational. And Harvey's displays of combat actions in civilian life are often subtle, leading the reader to easily miss or overlook the importance of these acts. One such obvious example of Harvey's displaying combat survival skills in civilian life emerges in *Northern Lights* when the brothers, after a restless night of watching football at home, stop by Franz's, a local bar/restaurant in Sawmill Landing. Harvey, Paul, Paul's wife, Grace, and Addie (the romantic interest of both brothers) then decide to drive out to the town junkyard in hopes of spotting a bear. In a sense, such an activity, in which they seek to essentially ambush a bear, could have reminded Harvey of

a combat ambush mission in Vietnam. In fact, O'Brien makes this connection explicit: "They lay in ambush at the junkyard" (O'Brien 109). Harvey then lights up a cigarette, "cupping the red glow in his palm" (O'Brien 108). Later, while still waiting in the darkness for any signs of an elusive junkyard bear, Harvey again lights another cigarette and shields the flame deliberately. This time Paul sees his brother's seemingly irrational act and immediately associates it with Harvey's time in Vietnam: "Harvey coughed and lit a fresh cigarette. Somewhere he'd learned the trick of cupping the glow in his palm. The old soldier, Perry [Paul] thought with a grin" (O'Brien 110). Of course, the reader could attribute Harvey's cupping of the flame to his not wanting to spook a junkyard bear, but it seems as though his shielding of the flame is instinctive and would have occurred in any such civilian situation which, for Harvey, could have resonated as being inherently similar to night combat.

During actual night combat, illuminating one's own or a fellow comrade's position—by the beam of a flashlight or the flame of a Zippo lighter—could result in death or injury to self and/or *philos* (comrades). O'Brien makes this apparent in *The Things They Carried*. In the story "In the Field," one soldier reveals, while searching for a comrade's body, that he feels solely responsible for the loss of his buddy who had been killed because of a switched on flashlight that had illuminated a picture of his girlfriend. (O'Brien 170-76). For Harvey, such a cigarette-lighting protocol is therefore not irrational but is rather an undeniable moment of a valuable combat survival skill persisting into civilian life.

This night "ambush," however, is not the only instance in which Harvey's combat survival skills surface in his postwar civilian life. After a trip to Grand Marais (Sawmill

Landing and Grand Marais are towns in Minnesota separated by nearly sixty miles) to participate in a ski race, Harvey and his brother Paul decide to ski the nearly sixty-mile trek home to Sawmill Landing through the wilderness of Minnesota. The brothers become lost and nearly starve to death. During the ordeal, Harvey instinctively relies on a combat skill as he leads the way into the wilderness. Harvey communicates with his brother with hand-signals: a “sweeping overhand motion” signal urging Paul to move forward and a raised fist urging him to stop (O’Brien 193). Such motions are used by soldiers during combat missions to silently direct movement. Again, as with remaining unseen by shielding light sources, remaining unheard while marching—whether through the use of hand signals or simply wrapping dog tags in tape—acts to save lives. Finally, it seems important to reiterate that Harvey’s combat skills are more likely to surface in situations that resemble aspects of actual combat. Trail-blazing through the wilderness of Minnesota is much like a jungle patrol, just as waiting silently in a car in the darkness for a junkyard bear somewhat resembles a night ambush.

#### Staying in Combat Mode: Seeing Danger in the Surrounding Environment

Another indicator of staying in combat mode is a constant state of mental hyper-vigilance, often manifested by veterans who are skeptical of others and their surrounding environment; these survivors of war seek to protect themselves by seeing—and preparing for—danger in situations that the non-veteran or non-refugee would assume were entirely safe. The military style patrols that former Vietnamese soldier Kien in Bao Ninh’s *The Sorrow of War* and former U.S. Army specialist James Griffin in Stephen Wright’s

*Meditations in Green* engage in after the war are indicative of such behavior. James Griffin, a former member of the 1069<sup>th</sup> Military Intelligence Group, who spent most of his tour looking for targets in photographs of devastated Vietnamese landscapes, once home seems to find solace in nightly reconnaissance-like patrols through the city:

Up late and into the street, that was my habit then, the night's residue still shifting softly through my head, I'd wander down to the corner, stand shivering in the sun, waiting for the light to change and my reconnaissance to begin. I was a spook. All my papers were phony. The route was the same every afternoon, a stitching of right angles across the heart of the city where I mingled anonymously with the residents of the day world.

(Wright 4)

While on these patrols, Griffin moves almost ghost-like through the city, surveying his surroundings, taking notice of possible dangers or threats. Griffin's "patrols" demonstrate the persistence of a combat readiness persisting into civilian life; moreover, his use of observation points further illustrates this point. Towards the end of the novel, Griffin and Trips (Griffin's close friend and fellow Vietnam veteran) conduct reconnaissance missions, setting up observation posts in an attempt to enact revenge on a person they believe to be their heartless former first sergeant, Sergeant Anstin. Griffin recalls one such rooftop observation mission: "Look . . . It was one we had spied on once through binoculars from the rooftop at our backs" (Wright 313). Later, while continuing to follow Anstin, Trips and Griffin again rely on their military training and wartime experiences to set up another observation post of sorts in the "doorway of a closed shoe store across the street" (Wright 315).

Such combat-like night patrols or observation post stakeouts are not limited to American Vietnam veterans. Kien, a veteran of the North Vietnamese Army's (NVA) 27<sup>th</sup> Lost Battalion, similarly often wanders through his home city of Hanoi conducting what appear to be night reconnaissance patrols. During these nightly ambulations, Kien attempts to overcome a writer's block of sorts (Ninh 84-85, 148-49). But, these nightly patrols also amount to a ritual of sorts in which Kien walks and secures a perimeter; after securing the perimeter, he can return to his desk to write again. This occurrence of combat-like patrols among Vietnamese and American veterans reveals yet another specific way in which a broken capacity for social trust may derail the postwar lives of injured veterans. They may no longer *trust* that their surroundings are safe and free of danger. Therefore, nightly or continual patrols may become paramount in securing a veteran's ability to function in a civilian world that may seem to present just as many possible dangers as their previous wartime surroundings.

Like combat veterans, war refugees may also show a propensity to rely upon skills and actions needed to survive war in their postwar lives. In Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge*, a fictional account of a Vietnamese refugee family living in America, Mai Nguyen on several occasions sees features of her war-torn homeland in relatively safe American landscapes and buildings. In fact, these visions sometimes directly dictate her actions, and she applies previously learned wartime skills to her postwar life. For example, when Mai is visiting her sick mother in Arlington Hospital in Virginia, she sees in the hospital's front windows a potential danger. While in Vietnam, Mai learned to stay away from windows in the lobbies of government buildings (such as hospitals), for these areas were susceptible to attack (Cao 3). Remembering this danger, Mai views the front

windows of Arlington Hospital in America with distrust, even though the facility clearly rests in a secure and safe area:

This is Arlington Hospital, I reminded myself. There beyond the door, was the evenly paved lot, its perimeters unenclosed by barbed wire or sandbags. Visitors mingled in the lobby; I had been taught to avoid the front portion of buildings. In Saigon, it would have been a danger zone, as was any zone that a hand grenade could conceivably reach if thrown from a passing vehicle. (3)

A veteran or refugee's tendency to remain combat-ready in his/her postwar life can easily disrupt attempts at achieving a fulfilling homecoming or resettlement. Not only are these behaviors often detrimental to reintegrating into civilian life (as they often lead to clashes with family, coworkers, and employees), but they also serve unintentionally to further self-label a veteran or refugee as an "outsider" of sorts to the surrounding community. And again, a broken capacity for social trust lies at the core of the tendency to remain combat-ready. If a veteran or refugee does not *trust* that his or her surrounding environment is and will remain safe and secure, a constant state of vigilance and the use of specific survival skills (similar to the ones learned, valued, and utilized while in a warzone) may seem necessary to ensure both physical safety and survival and to prevent another possible break in *themis*.

Another example of Mai's seeing wartime danger in civilian landscapes occurs when she travels to the Canadian border with her friend, Bobbie. Mai considers crossing into Canada so she can call her grandfather in Vietnam to inform him that his daughter, Mai's mother Tuyet, had been hospitalized. After the war, it could be especially risky for

a Vietnamese refugee to attempt to call Vietnam from America, due to the American embargo on Vietnam. The border, then, psychically paralyzes her, preventing Mai from crossing into Canada. Perhaps the border reminds her of military check points in Vietnam. Or perhaps the Canadian border is analogous to the hazardous and deadly demilitarized zone (DMZ) that separated North and South Vietnam during the war. While approaching the Canadian border, Mai seems to fear that the area is unsafe and, in a learned adaptation to surviving war, she observes the border for danger:

I scanned the road ahead for barbed wire or barricades . . . I peered over the dashboard across the unfortified boundary, and, just like my mother had she been with me instead of in a hospital bed in Virginia, I could see only danger looming in the land, over there. (13)

So, Mai, Kien, and Griffin—all witnesses to the devastation of the Vietnam War—see the potential for danger in their postwar physical surroundings.

#### Staying in Combat Mode: Viewing Civilian Life as a Combat Mission

Like Harvey's hand signals and the urban patrols of Kien and Griffin, Paco (in Larry Heinemann's *Paco's Story*) also transfers actions and skills suitable and appropriate for war to his postwar civilian life, and he does so by applying a combat-like, methodical approach to his civilian job. After a disappointing job search, in which several potential employers are put off by Paco's service in Vietnam, Texas Café owner and fellow veteran (of another, different war—WWII, the so-called “good war”) Ernest Monroe offers Paco a job as a dish washer. Paco soon turns the somewhat monotonous

task of washing and drying a seemingly endless stack of dishes into a combat-like mission. He becomes unwavering and focused on his task, completely immersing himself in his job for hours on end:

The process is straightforward and mechanical, James, all arms are back, side stepping and skipping—Paco leaning over the washtub, slopping garbage and burning-hot soapy bleach water on his T-shirt and trousers and doubled-up apron; his fingernails are white with grease and his face squinched up and one eye squeezed shut because of the cigarette he keeps in his lips. First the breakfast dishes (often every dish in the place) and some of the pots and pans, then the lunch rush and the rest of the pots and pans, then catch up all afternoon (Paco coming to know many of the dishes and much of the cookware as individual objects—on sight; knowing that he washes some things five and six times a day). (114)

According to Shay, this tendency to turn a civilian job into a combat-like assignment is not uncommon among veterans with complex and chronic, combat-related psychological injuries. For example, Shay includes a story of two of his veteran-patients, “River” and “Farmer” (pseudonyms), who both became workaholics of sorts, viewing their jobs as missions in which they only *trusted* themselves to complete the tasks of the job correctly. “River” worked long shifts at a toll booth until his accumulating loss of sleep led him to assault a motorist, and he thereby lost his job. “Farmer” similarly turned his job in the pharmaceutical industry into an addiction of sorts, arriving earlier than everyone else and working methodically and relentlessly at each given task. He eventually lost his job when the parent company sold the business, thereby devaluing the workers (perhaps easily



becoming another postwar violation of *themis* in the eyes of a veteran who may have experienced such devastating breaks previously during his combat tour(s)) (Shay 53-59).

Moreover, Shay reminds readers that Odysseus also turns a postwar task (returning home to Ithaca) into a mission of sorts. After Aeolus (king of the winds) provides Odysseus with a swift, following wind, the Greek veteran stays up for nearly nine days with no sleep, working the sail because he does not *trust* his crew to properly complete the task (job). This behavior proves disastrous for Odysseus and his crew. Eventually Odysseus succumbs, and once he falls asleep, his crew, curious as to the content of Odysseus' "treasure" from Aeolus, unleashes hurricane-like winds that push the crew hopelessly off course (Shay 53-54). Thus, as Shay notes, combat veterans with chronic injuries may turn their postwar occupations into combat missions. They may work non-stop and methodically at the cost of sleep, personal health, or family relationships. And this "need" to work in such a determined, unceasing way, as is the case with Odysseus, often arises from a broken capacity for social trust. If a soldier fails in his job during war, he may lose his life or cause the death of a friend.

Like Odysseus, "Farmer," and "River," Paco too works long hours at his job. He approaches his job with a compulsiveness that the reader may easily equate to the mindset he had previously relied upon in Vietnam during his solo combat missions in setting traps for the enemy beyond the safety of the perimeter of U.S. forward combat bases. And Paco's ritual for preparing to set booby traps is eerily similar to (in terms of his methodical approach) his later preparation for his dish-washing ritual:

But Paco would begin the evening at dusk by arraying his booby traps before him—tricked-up claymores, short-fused frags on stakes or in C-

ration cans rigged to tripflares . . . Paco would select a number of booby traps, cram them into a gray gas-mask bag he had, secure it tightly around the small of his back, slip the fillet knife under the strap around his belly, then wait for dark and crawl on his hands and knees from the edge of the perimeter into the woods. (191)

As shown previously, Heinemann also makes Paco's methodical, combat-like approach to washing dishes apparent by allotting nearly six pages to a detailed description of a typical shift at work for Paco in the Texas Café (Heinemann 110-16). Paco sets up his work station systematically, filling the sink tubs with just the right mixture of hot water, soap, and bleach. He sets up the dishes he must wash and pursues each one in an orderly fashion. He then moves on to the pots and pans with equal tenacity. Although Paco's job is tedious, labor-intensive, and perhaps boring and bland, he seems to feel comfortable at the task. Paco's approach allows him, perhaps, to control the task and to make sure it will be completed in a way he knows is right and best. He only has to rely on his own abilities; he does not have to trust others with the task of ensuring a thorough cleaning of the dishes, pots, and pans. Intrusive combat memories, however, seem to interrupt Paco's efforts. Towards the end of his shift, Paco always has to clean his work station, and every night he notices, without fail, the smell of the dirty grease trap. And the odor reminds him of the devastation at Fire Base Harriette:

And James, cleaning the grease trap never fails to remind Paco of that day and a half he spent by himself at Fire Base Harriette—it is the stink, the stench of many well-rotted human corpses—and always sends him home

Saturdays looking for a drink, “Just the whiskey, thanks. Skip the ice,”  
 he’ll say to Myrna at the Geronimo Hotel. (Heinemann 116)

So Paco’s methodical and deliberate approach to his work seems to allow him relief from his memories of war, but this liberation is always fleeting.

### Remaining in Combat Mode: Working Through or Acting Out?

The examples of characters remaining combat-ready serve to illustrate subconscious moments of what Freudian theory identifies as the “acting out” or the “working through” of traumatic events. Freudian traumatic neurosis, according to Cathy Caruth, involves a survivor of trauma reenacting events unwittingly and repeatedly (2). Perhaps, for example, Harvey’s eye injury occurred during a night ambush in which he had used hand signals and had hidden the glow of his cigarette in the moments preceding his traumatic injury. If this were the case, perhaps Harvey’s remaining combat-ready surfaces in part as the acting out of certain moments or details that surrounded his traumatic injury. During a traumatic event, a survivor may remember many details which may seem superfluous. For example, one may remember a distinct smell (as with Paco and the grease trap) or a certain object, neither of which had anything directly to do with the traumatic event. This seemingly random, lucid remembering occurs, in part, because victims of trauma often take inventory of everything surrounding the event, relevant to the trauma or not.

While remaining combat-ready and acting out may appear similar, it seems unlikely that instances of staying in combat mode surface as attempts by characters to

“work through” a traumatic event. According to LaCapra, working through involves a process in which

[a] person tries to gain critical distance on a problem and to distinguish between past, present, and future. To put the point in drastically oversimplified terms: for the victim, this means the ability to say to oneself: “yes, that happened to me back then. It was distressing, overwhelming, perhaps I can’t entirely disengage myself from it, but I’m existing here and now, and this is different from back then.” (143-44)

It is difficult to envision Harvey ever saying to himself, “I’m existing here and now, and this is different from back then.” Many of O’Brein’s characters emerge as hopelessly stuck in the past. And in the case of Harvey, the fact that he cannot remember exactly how he lost an eye complicates his ability to work through his ordeal successfully. So it could be concluded with relative certainty that most moments of remaining combat ready seem to have more in common with the process of acting out than with the process of working through. However, it must be noted here that the examples included in this chapter of characters displaying combat skills in civilian life may be seen as subtle moments of acting out. Most instances of acting out, according to LaCapra, are directly destructive to the survivor of trauma (143). For example, if Harvey consistently became extremely intoxicated<sup>10</sup> or tried to start fights with everyone who asked about his eye injury, such an occurrence would be more aligned with Freudian acting out than are his

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10. Harvey, though, does struggle with addictive behavior—most noticeably alcohol abuse. I will consider Harvey’s use of alcohol in more depth in the fourth chapter of this thesis.

subtle hand signals. Such fighting and drinking could lead to injury, arrest, isolation, and possible death—all of which are directly destructive to the veteran and others.

In this chapter I have provided specific examples of characters remaining in combat mode in their postwar, civilian lives. Whether displaying vestiges of combat behavior through hand signals, through city patrols, through the avoidance of potentially hazardous landscapes, or through treating civilian life as a combat mission, the characters included in this chapter all—to varying degrees—remain frozen in time. And to reiterate Shay's findings, such a tendency to remain combat-ready often surfaces as a very real consequence of combat trauma. In the following chapter I will examine another manifestation of combat trauma that arises in the literature about veterans and refugees alike: the common tactics of self-misrepresentation, misdirection, and testing others.

## CHAPTER III:

THE RELIANCE ON *METIS*: SELF-PROTECTION THROUGH  
MISREPRESENTATION AND MISDIRECTION

Many veterans and refugees who had previously experienced some sort of violation of “what’s right” in war or during their homecoming have found the tactics of testing others and misrepresenting themselves to be very valuable in securing self-protection against future possible breaks in trust. Many injured veterans and refugees, as a result, learn to rely on *metis* (which Shay translates as “cunning tricks and strategy”) in postwar relationships and social situations. In much of the literature of the Vietnam War, trusted institutions or leaders often betray combatants and, as a result, these veterans return home unable to trust others. One way to keep untrustworthy others at a distance is by lying about one’s own identity or painting oneself as dangerous so as to push others away. For example, a veteran who has experienced broken trust may think something along these lines: “The institution or leader with whom I trusted my own life lied to me and betrayed me, so why would I trust anyone (or any institution—the VA for example) at home—even close friends and family?” By not trusting others and misrepresenting oneself (through a reliance on *metis*), a veteran—or refugee—hopes to prevent future similar traumas. If a veteran no longer trusts that a person or institution will act in accordance with “what’s right,” the same person or institution will be powerless to inflict another devastating moral wound (Shay 206, 228). If one’s willingness to trust others is weakened through betrayal, fulfilling and loving relationships are exceedingly difficult to obtain. Additionally, a reliance on deception or misrepresentation can be seen as another form of “staying in combat mode.” Deception and misrepresentation are invaluable in

combat, but if they persist into postwar life, they can prevent or complicate a full homecoming.

In this chapter I will examine this reliance on the tactics of self-misrepresentation and the testing of others (collectively another powerful manifestation of combat trauma) that—like the tendency to remain combat-ready—often robs veterans and refugees of a complete and socially fulfilling homecoming and postwar life. In considering this reliance on *metis*, I will provide several specific examples of veterans and refugees testing others by omitting the full truth of their pasts or by providing false or misleading information to others. I have found that the characters John Wade, Harvey, Paco, and Mai use *metis* most overtly. So, I will analyze specific instances in which these characters seek self-protection through a reliance on self-misrepresentation and the testing of those who have not experienced war directly. But before exploring these examples from the literature of the Vietnam War, I will return to Odysseus' homecoming journey, as Odysseus' story of delayed homecoming includes clear examples of how a veteran may keep others at a distance through *metis*. As Shay makes clear, seemingly constant misrepresentation and testing surrounded Odysseus' postwar travels.

According to Shay, Odysseus certainly relied on testing others and deception both while at the court of the Phaeacians and upon returning home to Ithaca. At the Phaeacian court, King Alcinous persists in asking his mysterious visitor (Odysseus) to reveal his identity. It is not until after nearly a day and a half of relaxing and dining at the Phaeacian court that Odysseus reveals his actual name. And he only reveals his name after he has tested his audience (the Phaeacians) by announcing, "I am Odysseus son of Laertes . . . who am a worry to all men by my wiles" (qtd. in Shay 17). This warning serves as a way

to maintain an emotional distance from his audience, perhaps protecting against future breaks in *themis*. He seems to be saying in the sub-text of his introduction “I will speak, but know that I am dangerous. Do not come too close. That way you cannot hurt or betray me.” Here at the Phaeacian court, Odysseus first fails to identify himself (deception), tests the motives of his audience (by listening closely and silently to the conversations of the Phaeacians for nearly two days), and then reveals himself to be potentially dangerous and not to be trusted (saying all should be concerned with his trickery) (Shay 12-18).

Again, once Odysseus reaches his home at Ithaca, he employs deceit, deception, and the testing of others. First Odysseus tells Athena (goddess of war), who is also in disguise and misrepresenting herself, that he is a murderer and fugitive from Crete. Again this relaying of a dangerous background may serve as a form of self-protection and distancing. Later, after Athena disguises Odysseus as an old beggar (in order to test the fidelity of Penelope), he again misrepresents himself to his own wife. Shay argues that this instance of misrepresentation primarily is a form of Odysseus’ testing the fidelity of Penelope’s love for him; he had previously learned of her suitors—or ancient “Jody”<sup>11</sup>—and did not know if she had waited for him or not.

Odysseus—disguised as an old beggar—then explains to Penelope that he knew Odysseus and that the hero would soon be returning to Ithaca. The goddess Athena then puts Penelope into a trance of sorts (to delay her recognizing the beggar’s true identity) before a revealing exchange between Eurycleia (Odysseus’ former wet-nurse) and

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11. In military culture, a “Jody” refers to a civilian who seduces a soldier’s wife or girlfriend while that same soldier is away from home fighting a war (Appy, *Working-Class War*, 106).



Odysseus in which a scar, that he had received as a child when attacked by a boar, on Odysseus' thigh reveals his true identity to Eurycleia (Shay 133). Shay suggests that Odysseus' scar can suggest some kind of prewar trauma. Apparently, Odysseus' wounding by the boar occurred during a hunting trip with his grandfather who was a career criminal. Did some sort of traumatic episode occur on this hunting trip that resulted in the scar on Odysseus' thigh? It is impossible to know, as there is no direct textual evidence to suggest this. Shay suggests, though, that such a trauma would certainly explain Odysseus' hatred towards his father (possibly a misdirection of anger of his father for failing "to protect him from his villainous maternal grandfather") and his almost set-in-stone, unwavering tendency to trust no one and to believe that others only seek to exploit, hurt, or humiliate him (Shay 143-44). After imagining Odysseus to be sitting across from him in his office as one of his patients, Shay accounts for Odysseus' scar as follows:

I don't pretend to have infallible intuition about people, but sitting across from Odysseus in the VA Clinic, knowing his war history and his life afterward as a veteran, I have a whiff of something else, of pre-military trauma that settled him firmly in an I'll-get-them-before-they-get-me mentality before he even left for Troy. The most violent and intractable cases of combat trauma we have worked with in the VA Clinic have frequently experienced rapes or other severe abuse and neglect in childhood and or adolescence prior to military service.

The scar on Odysseus' thigh by which Eurycleia penetrates his cover, and by which he identifies himself to his father, strikes me as central to understanding Odysseus. (Shay 142)

Shay's interpretation of Odysseus' scar does not serve to suggest that the majority of actual or fictional Vietnam veterans experienced some pre-military trauma of abuse or neglect. Instead the story of Odysseus' scar shows how such a prewar trauma can lead to a life of mistrust, and if similar traumas or violations occur in combat or homecoming, incidents of combat trauma can easily become "violent and intractable." While the majority of Vietnam veterans presumably did not experience serious forms of prewar trauma, it does not seem far-fetched to suggest that a significant number of those who served as combat soldiers in Vietnam could have perhaps come from troubled pasts. As historian Christian G. Appy makes clear, a considerable number of working-class soldiers who saw combat in Vietnam experienced pasts of poverty, discrimination, or incomplete or broken families: "If you assembled a typical squad of infantrymen on their way to Vietnam, you could hardly find a group of young people who had encountered more of the grimmer actualities of American life—its poverty, racism, and violence" (82). John Wade, the veteran-protagonist in Tim O'Brien's *In the Lake of the Woods*, definitely experiences a traumatic prewar event (in the form of his father's suicide) that begins Wade's retreat inward into the mirrors in his mind—a coping tactic that gives Wade the ability to reshape his surroundings, to trick reality, to seek and obtain affection, and to suppress sadness and fear temporarily (65). Moreover, Philip Caputo included a brief detail in his combat memoir, *A Rumor of War*, which I believe to be very revealing about

the prewar lives of many enlisted soldiers who saw combat in Vietnam. In describing the backgrounds of the enlisted men in his platoon, Caputo writes,

Most of them came from the ragged fringes of the Great American Dream, from city slums and dirt farms and Appalachian mining towns. With depressing frequency, the words 2 yrs. high school appeared in the square labeled EDUCATION in their service record books, and, under FATHER'S ADDRESS, a number had written "Unknown." (Caputo 27)

Such backgrounds could certainly shape how a soldier internalized a betrayal or break in *themis*. Many looked to the military as a way to gain confidence and direction or perhaps looked to the military for a father figure. If such an institution betrayed them, such an occurrence could be increasingly devastating to a soldier's *thumos* (character/heart/"fighting spirit") and ability to trust others. Such backgrounds could perhaps partially account for the prevalence of displays of deception, misrepresentation, trickery, and testing found in both the memoirs and the fictional literature of the Vietnam War.

Perhaps the best illustration of such trauma is John Wade's reliance on *metis* (cunning tricks) in the form of misdirection and trickery throughout his entire life, and these tactics eventually devolve into a debilitating tendency of self-deception in which Wade seems to lose his grip on reality. Before going to Vietnam, Wade learned to use, quite literally, misdirection and misrepresentation—through practicing magic—as a way to escape from the anxieties and stresses in his life. After war, he uses the same tactics to help re-enter civilian life and cope with the painful emotions associated with his pre-combat and combat traumas. In response to stressors (whether they be his father's teasing Wade about his weight or his father's alcohol abuse and eventual suicide), Wade would

retreat to the basement and practice his magic tricks in front of a mirror. There, in the reflection, he reformed his troubles into a new reality, and a closeness with his father became possible:

As a boy John Wade spent hours practicing his moves in front of the old stand-up mirror down in the basement. He watched his mother's silk scarves change color, copper pennies becoming white mice. In the mirror, where miracles happened, John was no longer a lonely little kid. He had sovereignty over the world . . . Everything was possible, even happiness.

In the mirror, where John Wade mostly lived, he could read his father's mind. Simple affection for instance. "Love you, cowboy," his father would think.

Or his father would think, "Hey report cards aren't everything."  
(O'Brien 65).

So cognitively powerful is this act that, metaphorically, he carries the mirror with him throughout life:

The mirror made this possible, and so John would sometimes carry it to school with him or to baseball games, or to bed at night. Which was another trick: how he secretly kept the old stand-up mirror in his head. Pretending, of course—he understood that—but he felt calm and safe with the big mirror behind his eyes, where he could slide away behind the glass, where he could turn bad things into good things and just be happy.

The mirror made things better.

The mirror made his father smile all the time. The mirror made the vodka bottles vanish from their hiding place in the garage, and it helped with the hard, angry silences at the dinner table. (O'Brien 65-66)

Later, while serving in a combat unit in Vietnam, Wade again relies on trickery to survive life as a ground soldier and to navigate the traumatic episodes of his tour. In fact, Wade relies so much on his magical abilities that his comrades gave him the nickname "Sorcerer." Athena bestowed a similar title on Odysseus; she labeled him a "master of tricks" (Shay 3). The Vietnam War was in many ways other-worldly and perhaps surreal, so Wade, in a sense, was well prepared. Due to the tunnels, spooks, and traps that confronted the troops, in Vietnam acts of levitation and disappearing seemed myriad. While in Vietnam, Wade performed card and rope tricks for both American comrades and Vietnamese villagers, and soon enough his peers believed he had magical powers and labeled him as a good luck charm of sorts. Moreover, during the most traumatic event of his time in Vietnam—the incident at Thuan Yen where members of his company killed many civilians and he himself shot an old man and a comrade, PFC Weatherby—Wade again tries to reshape reality and trick his own memory (to misrepresent reality to himself) in order to forget the horror of the day:

John Wade would remember Thuan Yen the way chemical nightmares are remembered, impossible combinations, impossible events, and over time the impossibility would become the richest and deepest and most profound memory.

This could not have happened. Therefore it did not.

Already he felt better. (109)

Upon returning home, Wade again relies on *metis*. He continues to trick himself and delude his memory so that he can function in civilian life and pursue a political career without guilt. Wade's reliance on *metis* emerges again as a way to protect himself from trauma. But instead of misrepresenting himself to others, he resorts to using his skills to trick his own memory so as to protect himself from his own guilt about his wartime trauma—especially those memories of Thuan Yen:

Sorcerer thought he could get away with murder. He believed after he'd shot PFC Weatherby—which was an accident, the purest reflex—he tricked himself into believing it hadn't happened the way it happened. He pretended he wasn't responsible; he pretended he couldn't have done it and therefore hadn't; he pretended it didn't matter much; he pretended that if the secret stayed inside him, with all the other secrets, he could fool the world and himself too. (O'Brien 68)

Finally, in a general sense, Wade deceives those close to him by not revealing the complete truth of his wartime experiences. He perhaps fears losing both his wife Kathy and an upcoming political election. Wade may feel his story and participation at Thuan Yen are both too shameful and traumatic to share, and he likely does not want to risk traumatizing his wife.<sup>12</sup> Wade becomes increasingly unable to access the “truth” of what actually happened in Thuan Yen, as he has, for years, been burying and reforming his wartime memories.

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12. This fear of “secondary traumatization” seems to be a major block in many injured veterans' attempts at sharing their war narratives; they may feel their stories of hurt will inevitably hurt others (Shay, *Odysseus in America*, 82-83).

In addition to John Wade, another of O'Brien's fictional veteran-characters, Harvey in *Northern Lights*, relies on *metis*—in the form of misrepresentation—upon returning home. Harvey's misrepresentations mirror those of Odysseus in the sense that he seems to be deliberately distancing himself from others as a way of self-protection. O'Brien provides a blurred and limited account of Harvey's wartime experiences, which makes it difficult to identify a past violation of *themis* in combat that may have led to his reliance on *metis* in homecoming as a way to prevent future betrayals. Nevertheless, the reader intuits that Harvey has experienced a break in trust in Vietnam. Addie, his postwar love interest, continues to pressure Harvey to explain how he lost his eye, hoping for and expecting some heroic account of combat and sacrifice. But Harvey is reluctant to share the story behind his wounding. And O'Brien later makes it apparent that Harvey himself does not even know—or cannot even remember or does not want to remember—how he lost his eye (177). After returning home to Sawmill Landing, Harvey joins his brother, Paul, for a night of celebration at a local popular tavern, Franz's Glen. There Harvey begins to flirt with a waitress. But he is not honest with her. He does not reveal his true identity. In fact, he constructs a completely false identity for himself. The waitress questions this mysterious customer after Harvey invites her to join him and his brother in a homecoming celebration:

“I seen your picture,” she [the waitress] said. “Who are you anyhow?”

“A dentist,” Harvey smiled. “This is my assistant Dr. Watson [referring to his brother, Paul]. We pull teeth. I might add that we do a

very classy job of it, cut rate. Two for a buck. You might have seen our ads in the paper.” (O’Brien 40)

In a sense Harvey is interviewing—or testing—the waitress: “‘So,’ Harvey smiled. ‘Why don’t you just sit with us awhile and tell us your life history. I’m sure it’s classy’” (O’Brien 40). And although this may have been a simple instance of harmless flirtation between Harvey and the waitress, it seems to expose once again the potential distance that could arise between the American public and the returning, wounded veteran.

Like Harvey, Paco also deliberately obscures his identity. Paco’s misrepresentation, however, lies in what he chooses to omit; he never necessarily lies outright, but he also never provides a complete answer to a given question. Perhaps he fears that if he shows too much of his past, his injury, or his pain, people may see him as defective or tainted by war and may therefore avoid him. His answers to questions about his cane, his war wounds, or his reasons for being in Boone are always short and vague and contain both aspects of the truth and a hint of mystery. For example, when an auto mechanic offers to give Paco a ride into town, a short conversation concerning Paco’s time in Vietnam ensues. The mechanic persists in asking his passenger about details concerning his origins, war experiences, and wounds: “Where you from? Where you bound? Why the cane? Was the fighting as bad as they say?” (Heinemann 44). In response, Paco briefly mentions the attack on Fire Base Harriette in which he was the sole survivor. The mechanic then asks a more specific question concerning Paco’s survival: “What happened after they took you out of that place?” (Heinemann 45). This question is too much for Paco, so he obscures his own past, answering with a conversation-ending response that is at the same time truthful and an outright lie:



“‘Nothing much I guess’ . . . ‘They had me so zonked out on morphine I don’t much remember,’ Paco says, ‘you know?’ and that closes the subject” (Heinemann 45). This is a lie because Paco “remembers alright, and vividly” (Heinemann 45). He knows, perhaps, that if he tells the mechanic the truth—that he spent time in a triage field hospital and a Moribund Ward and later a recovery ward surrounded by seriously wounded soldiers—some of whom were rolling their eyes or gritting their teeth in pain—that story may have been too *truthful* and cost him a free ride into town. And if so, Paco would once again be left behind—this time on the side of the road. So instead of revealing the complete truth, Paco relies on *metis* to select and construct a mediated past.

While many Vietnam veterans relied on the use of *metis* upon returning home as both a way to test the trustworthiness of others and to prevent future injury, Vietnamese refugees who settled in the U.S. also depended on cunning and strategy to ease assimilation into American culture, to move past the trauma of losing one’s home, and to cope with the challenges that accompanied a new social environment. This reliance on *metis* among the Vietnamese refugee community in America is perhaps best represented by the character Mai and her Vietnamese-American community in Little Saigon, Virginia, in Lan Cao’s *Monkey Bridge*. After moving to America and settling with her mother, Thanh, in a small apartment near Little Saigon, Mai attempts to assimilate to her new life by partially breaking free of her past and beginning life as a college student at Mount Holyoke. But upon first arriving in America and settling with Uncle Michael (an American officer who was a close friend of Mai’s parents while serving in Vietnam) and his wife, Mary, Mai realizes that she truly misses her home and family in Vietnam. Mai knows, though, that she must remain strong and seemingly content in her new home in

America. Mai especially seems to miss her grandfather, Baba Quan, whose background and history remain contested and mysterious. At dinner one night in her new home with Uncle Michael and Mary, Mai notices that she had begun to rely on a skill that would make adjustment to her new home easier, for both herself and others. While chewing her food and holding back tears, Mai thought, “Tonight, more than any other night, I could see in myself the ability, honed since America to apply makeup, to conceal and disguise” (Cao 91). Mai, at the dinner table, relies on a form of emotional misrepresentation; she does not necessarily disguise her physical appearance—like Odysseus presenting himself to his wife in the form of an old beggar—but instead chooses to disguise and hide her emotions. Mai does disguise herself physically to an extent, as she no longer wears traditional Vietnamese attire in America. The Vietnam War and the transformation of her home city, Saigon, by the North Vietnamese would have made Saigon in many ways unrecognizable to Mai. So perhaps much of Mai’s sadness is caused by her realization that her home is gone. This could be a traumatic revelation. Many Vietnam veterans—both American and Vietnamese—seemed to feel as though they too could neither figuratively locate nor return to the home from which they had departed. Returning to the home of their past perhaps became impossible, as their home had inevitably changed while they were gone. But furthermore, veterans would likely see their homes through different eyes; war had changed them, making their previous, prewar perceptions of “home” impossible to recapture. Both refugees and veterans—like Odysseus—seemed to share the potential for a forever-lost homecoming, as it remained impossible to return to the homes of their past.

In addition to employing *metis* by disguising true emotions, Mai later resorts to cunning and strategy as a way to conform to the expectations of her college admissions interviewer, Amy Layton, at Mount Holyoke. To begin the interview, Amy, seemingly without concern as to how her interviewee might feel about going directly into a topic that would inevitably be associated with loss and sadness, asks Mai about Vietnam: “So you come from Vietnam, Mai?” (Cao 125). Mai answers Amy’s questions with truthful, though non-specific, answers. However, Mai all the while holds back a desire to both further explain the complexities of Vietnam’s past and America’s involvement there and to explain that wonderful memories surrounded her life in Vietnam too—not just memories of war. Nevertheless, Mai keeps her answers simple and maintains her composure. For example, after being asked about the weather in Vietnam, Mai relies on cunning to construct an answer that would conform to perceived expectations:

“It was very hot there. And humid,” I added. “I thought seventy degrees was cold when we first arrived. My mother put up the heat.” It was in my interest to sidestep as much as possible. I was not about to confront her preconceived notions head-on. The Trung Sister strategy, the strategy of fluidity and softness, is to master the art of evasion and distraction, to use momentum, not brute force as leverage. (Cao 129)

Not only is a dependence on distraction and evasion valuable for Mai in answering the college interviewer’s questions in a way that would be neither too revealing nor clash with her preconceived understandings of the war (Paco and Harvey use the same tactics in order to avoid speaking too openly about their war narratives or injuries so as to protect against possibly alarming the listener), such “arts” (evasion and

distraction) seem to be grounded in Vietnamese culture and the Vietnamese history of fighting invaders. The Trung sisters, by leading an army of Vietnamese warriors to hold back Chinese invaders, had worked their way into the collective identity and memory of Vietnam (Cao 29). And Mai draws on the cunning of the Trung Sisters for inspiration in making her way through her college interview: “The Trung Sisters’ strategy would be to guard our weak points and keep them hidden from sight” (Cao 126). Mai did just that; she kept her emotions and memories hidden. A reliance on *metis* (“cunning strategy”) could prove useful for veterans and refugees as a way to protect themselves from injury or to conceal a past that may result in further alienation on arrival in America. But an unceasing dependency on *metis* could result in mistrusting and distant postwar relationships. Similarly, when a veteran or refugee brings home survival skills from combat—essentially remaining combat-ready—self-protection is often prominent. But often, injured veterans and refugees achieve such self-protection at the cost of a complete and fulfilling homecoming.

In addition to the tactics of misrepresentation and misdirection, combat trauma also manifests itself in the form of substance abuse. And such a reliance on mind-altering substances is the subject of the following chapter. I will consider the ways in which characters abuse drugs and alcohol in order to either distance themselves from distressing memories of war or to attempt to psychically retrieve—or relive—such memories with more clarity. Similarly, other characters may use non-substance-related compulsive behaviors (cooking for example) in ways very similar to the use of drugs and alcohol.

## CHAPTER IV

ALCOHOL, NARCOTICS, AND COOKING: ESCAPING AND RELIVING TRAUMA  
THROUGH COMPULSIVE BEHAVIORS AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE

“Forget, remember, forget, remember.” (O’Brien, *Northern Lights*, 146)

He’ll [Vietnam veteran Paco Sullivan, US 54 800 409] take a couple of pills and a drink from his bottle, then sit down and untie his shoes. The laces and leather squeak. Then he takes down his jeans or wash pants and throws *everything* under his chair. And lies on the bed in his underwear, or naked, now that the weather’s hotter and hotter, talking to himself and rubbing his pasty, wrinkly feet together. And sometimes he prances around, but kind of hobbling, kind of deeply and slowly limping. He’s got the pills and that bottle on the dresser. Getting more and more drunk, holding his head with both hands. Slapping the flat of his belly with cupped hands, making a POP POP POP sound. Hoarsely whispering, “Come on, hit me! Hit me! Hit me!” and taking time out to wave that bottle around, drinking and splashing booze and slurring, “Bang! Bang! Bang-bang-bang!” Flicking his wrist and sprinkling booze in all corners of his room. (Heinemann, *Paco’s Story*, 205)

I have chosen to include a scene from Larry Heinemann’s *Paco’s Story*—in which Paco experiences a disheartening, somewhat ominous, and drug-and-alcohol-induced war flashback—as a second epigraph to this chapter because it illustrates how survivors of war with psychological injuries may rely on mind-numbing, mind-altering substances (most commonly drugs and alcohol) to cope with trauma memories. As the literature attests, two primary functions of drug and alcohol use among Vietnam War veterans are paramount: to retreat from physical and emotional pain associated with a daunting, traumatic war experience *and* to invite, to provoke, or to dare memories of war and traumatic events to surface. Furthermore, other characters who have also survived war may rely on repetitive activities (such as reading and cooking) to cope much as combat veterans may use drugs and alcohol. For example, the scents produced from cooking

authentic Vietnamese cuisine may distract a refugee from hurtful war memories of loss by taking his/her mind to a previous, prewar time of comfort and peace; or the same act of cooking could also serve to call out memories associated with surviving through the ordeal of war.

In this chapter, I will address three patterns of behavior in which veterans seek to either provoke or retreat from traumatic war memories. In the first section, I will consider specific instances of drug use, both prescription and illicit, found in the literature of the Vietnam War. Secondly, I will analyze two examples of how veterans may depend on heavy alcohol consumption in their attempts at coping with or provoking memories of loss and war. The third section examines how refugees and veterans may perform certain actions compulsively and near ritualistically in seeking to return to or escape the past. Throughout I argue that instances of substance use and compulsive behaviors are attempts at either confronting or avoiding wartime memories of hurt. Nevertheless, paradoxically, sometimes an attempt at escaping from a hurtful memory of trauma can lead to an unplanned, lucid remembering of the same trauma one is seeking to avoid. For example, a survivor of wartime trauma may seek to flee from painful memories through the use of alcohol, which may sometimes result in distressing dreams about war and loss.

#### Mainlining the Lotus: Drug Use (Prescription and Otherwise)

According to Jonathan Shay, Odysseus's time spent in the Land of the Lotus Eaters replicates the tendency among many injured veterans to use chemical substances in an effort to *forget* pain (emotional and physical). Moreover, Shay concludes that a

prolonged time spent in the Land of the Lotus Eaters (or time spent using drugs and alcohol in order to flee from pain) may easily disrupt a veteran's homecoming, figuratively causing her/him to lose forever all prospects of returning home (*Odysseus in America* 35-36). In the Land of the Lotus Eaters, the native inhabitants offer Odysseus and his men a "honeyed plant," which leads Odysseus' men to lose the motivation to continue their journey and to lose all hope of (and to forget about) returning home. By viewing Odysseus' time spent in the Land of the Lotus Eaters in light of the postwar narratives of his own Vietnam veteran patients, Shay is suggesting that when a veteran fails to confront the source of his pain by suppressing said pain through chemicals, he is denying himself all hope of obtaining a socially fulfilling and meaningful homecoming in which he is fully psychically and emotionally present to those around him: "Homer seems to be saying that if you are too successful in forgetting pain, forgetting grief, fear, and disgust, you may dry up the springs of sweetness, enjoyment, and pleasure in another person's company" (39). Forgetting thus interrupts one of the most valuable processes needed for the recovery from combat-related psychological injuries: the process of *remembering*.

In several instances throughout the literature, a veteran's drug use has very real roots in either his own wartime self-medication or in the medical treatment of the wounds he sustained in combat. Certainly Paco Sullivan relies on a chosen—or more accurately prescribed—lotus (in the form of prescription pills) to aid in his quest to forget pain. For many Vietnam veterans who used drugs and alcohol consistently in their postwar lives,

their first exposure to drugs often occurred while they were serving in Vietnam.<sup>13</sup> For example, Paco, immediately after killing a Viet Cong<sup>14</sup> (VC) in hand-to-hand combat, “drank every canteen [containing water] in sight and smoked dope [marijuana] until he was out of his mind” (196); and Specialist James Griffin, in Stephen Wright’s *Meditations in Green*, recounts that “dope was peddled openly in the battalion streets” (92); Wright also depicts Griffin talking about (or using) marijuana with his fellow soldiers in Vietnam (23). But Paco’s dependency on prescription drugs results mainly from a wartime injury. Paco is the only survivor of a deadly VC attack on Fire Base Harriette in which ninety-two other American soldiers in Alpha Company die. But Paco only barely survives.<sup>15</sup> He suffered “slashing lacerations, big watery burn blisters, and

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13. This may be a contested statement to some, one which historians, no doubt, still debate, as made apparent by the publication of Jeremy Kuzmarov’s recent work, *The Myth of the Addicted Army: Vietnam and the Modern War on Drugs*, in which he argues that drug addiction among U.S. soldiers in Vietnam was, in fact, far from widespread. While the extent to which American soldiers in Vietnam used—or were exposed to—drugs may remain a debatable issue, one would find it difficult to suggest with any historical accuracy that the levels of morphine and other pain medications doctors used when treating wounded soldiers could not have led to a potential for serious addiction in postwar life.

14. More accurately, the term Viet Cong refers to the South Vietnamese communist guerrilla forces of the People’s Liberation Armed Forces (Appy 146).

15. Perhaps one could argue that Paco did not survive the attack at all and that the novel amounts to a near ghost story in which Paco travels through Boone like an apparition, half living and half dead. After all, when the medics finally treat Paco in Vietnam, they place him halfway into a spare body bag, as if he hovered between life and death. And, as if he were hovering between life and death, Heinemann also refers to Paco as “the guy not dead, but should have been” (33, 48).



broken, splintered, *ruined* legs” (18).<sup>16</sup> And these severe injuries cause Paco constant and shooting leg, hip, and back pain in his postwar life. Before returning to America, military doctors and nurses treated and helped to “heal” Paco with a seemingly constant, unending flow of morphine. Phrases like “unscheduled shot of morphine,” “another healthy dose of morphine,” “another shot of morphine,” and “another quarter-grain of morphine” are ubiquitous in Heinemann’s narrative of the medical treatment of Paco (50, 54, 56,). And throughout Paco’s recovery period, apparently heavy doses of prescription pills eventually replaced shots of morphine (35).

So it is relatively unsurprising to learn that Paco shows up in Boone on a “silver-and-gray” bus in a drug-induced near-coma:

Paco is curled sideways in his aisle seat, well toward the back, with his chin jammed into his shoulder, his hands wedged between his thighs, and his black hickory cane stuck between the seat cushions. He is not really asleep, hunched as awkwardly as he is, but mighty groggy from the several *additional* doses of medication—muscle relaxers and anti-depressants—to the point of a near helpless stupor. His kidneys ache just like everyone else’s, and he has a roaring, crushing headache. He often has these now. Paco is in constant motion, trying to get settled and comfortable with that nagging, warm tingling in his legs and hips. He is

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16. Paco also suffers a dual moral injury at Fire Base Harriette that surfaces as a break in *themis*. At Fire Base Harriette an instance of friendly fire kills other U.S. soldiers and causes many of Paco’s physical injuries. Moreover, the U.S. military does not rescue Paco for nearly two days. So in Paco’s mind perhaps the military (the same institution for which he is risking his life and fighting a war) nearly kills him and then leaves him for dead. Certainly such occurrences do not align themselves with commonly held perceptions of moral responsibility.

sore and cramped in a way that no amount of stretching and yawning, no exercises or therapies, can assuage. His whole body tingles and thrums with a glowing, suffocating uncomfortability that is more or less the permanent condition of his waking life. (35-36) (*Italics added for emphasis.*)

Not only does this passage show the extent of Paco's physical pain and constant discomfort, but also a single word ("additional") reveals that Paco is probably abusing his medications for psychological as well as physical relief. Almost nightly, Paco relies on drugs and alcohol to flee from (to forget) physical and emotional pain, ingesting doses of anti-depressants and muscle relaxers in order to escape physical pain so as to achieve sleep (103). Drugs also allow him to retreat from the guilt, confusion, and anger that he carries related to several specific war memories: being left essentially to die at Fire Base Harriette; witnessing and participating in the rape of a NVA cadre; and stabbing a VC soldier to death.

And while Paco relies on prescription medications to escape from (or forget) physical pain, the same pills also evoke daunting memories of psychological trauma. For example, on nights in which he takes "stupefying doses of Librium and Valium," Paco begins to remember more details of the three traumatic combat experiences mentioned above. Each of Paco's four main recurring dreams (Paco being chased; Paco in a waiting room; Paco being led towards his execution; and Paco about to leave Vietnam uninjured) reveals more of the reality of Paco's three wartime traumatic experiences. In one recurring dream, Paco imagines that he is about to leave Vietnam uninjured, but he never hears his name called on the speakers that are announcing the names of all the soldiers

who have been approved to board the plane bound for the United States (143-46). This dream reflects Paco's memory of being left—essentially abandoned—for nearly two days at Fire Base Harriette. Moreover, drug use leads Paco to dream about and relive the intense emotions he felt while waiting for rescue. So, through prescription drug use, Paco is able to forget physical pain temporarily; but the same pills that aid to dispel physical pain also sometimes initiate powerful, symbolic remembering of psychological pain.

Paco Sullivan is not the only fictional character in the literature of the Vietnam War who uses—and overuses—drugs. Former Specialist James Griffin and his friend and fellow Vietnam veteran Everett Triplett (Trips) both also seek out the comfort afforded by drugs in their postwar lives. But unlike Paco (who mostly uses prescription drugs and alcohol), Griffin and Trips prefer illegal drugs, such as marijuana and heroin. And Griffin's postwar drug use becomes a methodical, almost ritualistic affair that leads to psychological self-distraction, self-disappearance, and near time travel:

On the glass table in front of me I carefully arranged my instruments: battered lighter engraved with the cartoon dog Snoopy, half a pack of Kools, plastic bag of DOUBLEUOGLOBE [heroin].

I went to work. I picked up a cigarette. I emptied out about an inch of tobacco. I poured in the powder. Et cetera, et cetera. Smoke rings drifted across my face. I jumped through a hole. I was gone.

I traveled.

I knew the euphoria of metal, the atavism of the cell, white nights of burning ice, the derangement of flesh, the deliquescence of dreams, the clarity of death.

I returned.

I stood in the window, mirror propped against the glass, rubbing camouflage stick over face and hands. (74)

Griffin describes his drug use as leading to the formation of some sort of dimensional warp into which he jumps mentally and travels through time and back.

Griffin's drug-induced time-jumping is directly related to Shay's ideas on attempted forgetting through "lotus" consumption. For example, the passage above invites some interesting questions related to forgetting and remembering: From what exactly is Griffin fleeing (or in other words, why does he seek to jump through the hole in time)? Where exactly does Griffin travel? What is his intended destination? Also, the final sentence of the passage is especially revealing, as it hints at some of Griffin's most troublesome memories of war. Thus, after Griffin returns from his drug-induced travels, he is standing in the window rubbing camouflage stick on his face and his hands, as if he is attempting to transform himself into a plant-like being, to fuse with the natural environment, or to find forgiveness for his culpability in destroying so much of the natural environment of South Vietnam. Like Paco, Griffin brings home to America guilt as a consequence of his participation in the destruction of the Vietnamese countryside. While in Vietnam, Griffin had the job of sorting through Air Force reconnaissance negatives, searching for evidence of enemy movement. If Griffin found any possible evidence of enemy movement, he had orders to mark those areas with a "black grease pencil." And the U.S. Air Force would later bomb all the areas Griffin had marked: "Wherever he put circles on the film there the air force would make holes in the ground" (43). So, it could be argued that Griffin's drug use causes powerful emotions of guilt to

surface, and to assuage this guilt, in part, Griffin paints himself to appear like the thing he played such a large part in eradicating in Vietnam: plant life. Similarly, Griffin's constant—near compulsive—gardening may suggest that he is trying, throughout the novel, to promote plant growth to symbolically replace what he had helped to eradicate in Vietnam.

Trips also abuses drugs, whatever drugs he can find (prescription and otherwise). For example, one postwar conversation between Trips and Griffin reveals that Trips had recently left a VA psychiatric ward—but not without first taking some souvenirs:

Griffin: "You're out."

Trips: "Yes, I am out."

Griffin: "You Okay?"

Trips: "My Friend, I'm genuine certified okay. Dr. Caligari threw up his hands. Mirabile! A spontaneous individuation. Nothing like it in the entire literature. Gave me a comb, bottle of Thorazine, showed me the gate. They let a bunch of us go every year on the anniversary of Freud's birth."

Griffin: "How do you feel?"

Trips: "About a hundred and two. Got anything special [drugs, most likely] in the house for a weary old soldier?"

Griffin: "Afraid the cupboard's bare, Pop."

Trips: "That's what I feared. Been away a long time." He reached into his pocket and flung onto the table between us a handful of colored capsules and tablets. "Cocktail nuts," he exclaimed, popping several into

his mouth. “Courtesy the hospital pharmacy. Try the purple shells, they’re great.” (37)

Not only does this passage describe reckless use of prescription pills, but the scene also presents another instance of a government institution—this time the VA—as contributing (unknowingly and unintentionally, of course) to a veteran’s dependency on drugs. During the Vietnam War, America used Dioxin (or “Agent Orange”) to defoliate possible enemy jungle sanctuaries.<sup>17</sup> And, after the war, the VA sought to treat American veterans’ combat-related psychological injuries through the use of more chemicals. Thorazine, then, replaces Dioxin as the Defense Department’s/VA’s chemical of choice for dealing with a new “enemy” that it struggled to understand, to grasp, and to defeat: PTSD. Moreover, the passage also shows the VA giving up on a patient. Paco, Griffin, and Trips all rely on drugs (both prescription and illicit) to forget and to remember in their attempts at coming to terms with their memories of war, but the most commonly used drug found in the literature seems always to be the more readily-available and legal drug: alcohol. And the military encouraged a life-long relationship with this drug among Vietnam veterans by commonly rewarding—or more accurately trying to pacify or numb—soldiers with this drug after the completion of military combat operations.

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17. The U.S. military, from 1961 to 1971, sprayed over eighteen million gallons of defoliants in South Vietnam, contaminating nearly six million acres of land (Appy, 129).

### Drowning in the Lotus: Alcohol Use

Shay suggests that many veterans with psychological injuries use alcohol to suppress distressing nightmares and/or to ease anxiety so that they can sleep (38). Veterans may also use alcohol to suppress powerful emotions (such as guilt or grief) from surfacing in waking life. Furthermore, Shay contends that such postwar “selective suppression of emotion” results from a very real adaptation from combat being carried over into civilian life after war. After all, suppressing one’s emotions (such as fear or sadness) while in combat can lead to increased combat effectiveness and can save lives—including one’s own life (39). Therefore a veteran may assume that suppressing (forgetting) his distressing traumatic memories could secure a more emotionally productive postwar life. For example, he might say, “If I can forget these distressing memories just for today or tonight, maybe I can get some work done or get to sleep.” Alcohol is effective, of course, in helping to forget, but it can also evoke troublesome memories, most commonly during alcohol-induced slumbers.

Both American and Vietnamese veteran characters seek out the psychic numbing powers of alcohol in their postwar lives as a way either to escape from or provoke traumatic memories. Here I will consider two cases—one involving a Vietnamese veteran and one involving an American veteran—in which seemingly different survivors of war (culturally, spiritually, ideologically, geographically) use alcohol in undeniably similar ways. Vietnamese veteran Kien in Bao Ninh’s *The Sorrow of War* illustrates how alcohol can be used to forget trauma. Like Paco, Kien experiences great loss and trauma during the war. And the reader soon learns that Kien (again similar to Paco) emerges at the end

of the war as one of only ten survivors out of his whole battalion—the infamous 27<sup>th</sup> Battalion, the “Lost Battalion” (4-5). And most of Kien’s postwar mental anguish is related to his near-death experience and the loss of so many of his fellow comrades. Recalling the horror of battle, Kien remembers,

That was the dry season when the sun burned harshly, the wind blew fiercely, and the enemy sent napalm spraying through the jungle and a sea of fire enveloped them [members of the Lost Battalion], spreading like the fires of hell. Troops in the fragmented companies tried to regroup, only to be blown out of their shelters again as they went mad, became disoriented, and threw themselves into nets of bullets, dying in the flaming inferno. Above them helicopters flew at the treetop height and shot them almost one by one, the blood spreading out, spraying from their backs, flowing like red mud. (5)

It is not surprising, then, to learn that such memories cause Kien much emotional distress in his postwar life and that he drinks heavily after the war. For example, when Kien attempts to pursue an education at a university in Hanoi, constant memories of combat force him to seek a way to forget his painful memories of war. And, of course, Kien turns to alcohol and drops out of school. His life becomes one in which he aimlessly wanders through the streets of Hanoi drunken and isolated:

He [Kien] became bored with his university studies. One morning he simply decided he wouldn’t attend. From that point on he ended his easy student life, quietly and for no apparent reason. He stopped reading newspapers, then books, then let everything go. He lost contact with his



friends, then with the outside world in general. Except drink. And cigarettes. He couldn't care less that he was penniless, that he drank and smoked almost nonstop. He wandered around outside, pacing the lonely streets. When he did sleep, it was a heavy drunken slumber. (70)

But like Paco, Griffin, and Trips, Kien's attempts at alcohol-induced forgetting often lead to very distressing remembrances of wartime traumas and losses:

In his dreams he saw Phuong now and then, but more often he dreamed of crazy, twisted things, distorted apparitions of loneliness and sorrow.

Horrible, poisonous nightmares brought back images that had haunted him constantly throughout the war. During the twilights of those cold nights the familiar, lonely spirits reappeared from the Jungle of Screaming Souls, sighing and moaning to him, whispering as they floated around like pale vapors, shredded with bullet holes. They moved into his sleep as though they were mirrors surrounding him. (70)

The two passages above show a veteran character consuming alcohol in his attempts to forget, and the excerpts account for several of the most profound symptoms of PTSD listed by the APA's *DSM-IV*. For example, in these two paragraphs alone, Kien suffers from nightmares (a psychic reliving of war); he has difficulty sleeping; he uses alcohol in attempts to suppress his memories of war; he has difficulty enjoying, concentrating on, and being successful in his university studies; and he is living his life in self-created,

extreme isolation.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, for Kien, nothing seems to matter more than his own alcohol consumption: “He lost contact with his friends, then with the outside world in general. Except drink” (70). And although alcohol keeps memories of war trauma from surfacing in Kien’s waking life, alcohol often allows suppressed memories to surface in his dreams with a devastating effect. In these dreams, Kien sees ghosts from the Jungle of Screaming Souls (the jungle from which he emerged as one of only ten survivors of the Lost Battalion). The ghosts are “shredded with bullet holes” and surround Kien like mirrors (70). So Kien’s alcohol use directly causes a very ominous form of remembering during sleep. Drinking, therefore, amounts to a very risky gamble: yes, alcohol is effective in suppressing harrowing memories, but it can also initiate an unwanted surfacing of these same memories.

Harvey Perry, in Tim O’Brien’s *Northern Lights*, also seeks to forget by drinking. Perhaps the most revealing dialogue in the novel—in terms of Harvey’s alcohol use—occurs between Paul and Harvey the morning after Harvey and Addie had spent the previous night “raving drunk.” The next morning, the brothers talk while Harvey is busy taking swigs from a bottle of wine and waxing his skis in preparation for a cross-country ski race later that day. Harvey, though, is noticeably upset. Addie has devastated him emotionally by abandoning him for an Olympic skier after their late night of drinking. And Harvey, as a result, stays up until dawn drinking and then vomits in the bathroom (140-43). While Harvey is obviously upset about Addie, his conversation with his brother

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18. According to the *DSM-IV*, PTSD may manifest in flashbacks, nightmares, an inability to fall and stay asleep, an increased startle response, irritability, detachment from others, a lost ability to feel emotions, and a lost ability to enjoy previously valued activities (American Psychiatric Association 463-68).

Paul shows that something else—his memories, his lack of memories, or his confusion about Vietnam—may be fueling his emotional distress and subsequent heavy alcohol consumption. And as if almost in direct dialogue with the theoretical work of Shay, Tim O’Brien overtly connects alcohol use to a veteran’s attempts at forgetting and remembering:

Harvey: “Come home from . . . feeling like a bum. War and all. Wasn’t so good, you know. I told you something about it last night, didn’t I?”

Paul: “Just a little. You were drunk. I forget.”

Harvey: “Forget, remember, forget, remember. No matter, I was a goddamn baby anyway. Is that ski done? What time is it? Just forget everything I say.” Harvey took a swig on his wine bottle. He went to the windows and looked out towards the west. Then he came back. He put a hand on Perry’s shoulder, slight at first and then harder. “You’re a good man, brother,” he said. He looked at Perry through his good eye. “I’m serious, you’re really my goddamn brother, aren’t you?” (146)

Harvey’s statements here reveal that what had been troubling him—and perhaps leading him to drink so much the previous night—are his wartime and homecoming experiences more than his failure to seduce Addie. Harvey hints at some painful memories when he states, “War and all. Wasn’t so good, you know.” And perhaps he keeps drinking and drinking in an attempt at forgetting some wartime memories. It seems more likely, though, that Harvey chooses to drink not to forget any specific traumatic war memories (because his memories of the war are very uncertain and convoluted) but that

he drinks in order to “forget” the painful emotions associated with his uncertainties and frustrations related to his injury and his homecoming. He is seeking to stop certain emotions from surfacing more than he is seeking to prevent any specific memory. So the passage first hints at a previous, alcohol-induced attempt at forgetting.

Moreover, Harvey cannot decide if he wants to—or needs to—remember or forget, as he makes clear by stating, “Forget, remember, forget, remember.” Harvey’s alcohol use also disrupts his ability to organize his thoughts and memories about his war. According to Shay, sobriety is one of the three main “starting points” for recovering from PTSD after war. (Safety and self-care must also be achieved.) And without an ability to maintain sobriety, according to Shay, a veteran loses “authority over his own process of memory” (38). Like many of Shay’s veteran-patients, Harvey has lost authority over his memory process as he exists in a constant flux between sobriety and intoxication. In addition to hinting at an attempt at forgetting, the passage also shows an instance of alcohol aiding Harvey in his own *attempts at remembering*. For example, Harvey tries to “communalize” (a term Shay uses to refer to a process in which a veteran’s combat narrative is “understood, remembered, and retold” (244)) part of his war narrative to his brother Paul when he is intoxicated. Harvey is drunk when he tells Paul “something about it [war/homecoming].” Moreover, Harvey takes a swig of wine and moves to the window to gaze out blankly. Such an empty gaze out the window could represent another alcohol-fueled instance of remembering war. Harvey, of course, turns away from the window eventually, and O’Brien writes that Harvey “came back” as if he were physically and temporarily absent from the room and conversation.

This westward gaze leads to several questions: Where did Harvey's mind wander? What was he thinking about as he gazed westward? Addie? Vietnam? Was he trying to recall exactly what had happened when he injured his eye in Vietnam? And, finally, what role—if any—did Harvey's alcohol consumption play in initiating his westward stare? Possibly, the late night of drinking evoked some upsetting memories of war and homecoming (thereby leading to very real forgetting); paradoxically, though, Harvey's early-morning swigs of wine further cause these memories to return to his consciousness, forcing Harvey towards the window and towards the west (thereby leading to very real remembering). Finally, it is telling that O'Brien has Harvey say to Paul after turning away from the window, "You're a good man, brother." It seems as though Harvey might have been talking to himself and unwittingly trying to convince himself that he is in fact a good man, regardless of what happened (or did not happen) in war.

### Cooking the Lotus Compulsively

As stated earlier in this study, Freudian theory presents two main processes by which survivors of trauma may seek to address their traumas later in life: "working through" and "acting out." And of special interest in this study is the latter process. According to Dominick LaCapra,

Acting out is related to repetition, and even the repetition *compulsion*—the tendency to repeat something *compulsively*. This is very clear in the case of people who undergo a trauma. They have a tendency to relive the past, to be haunted by ghosts or even to exist in the present as if one were still

fully in the past, with no distance from it. Victims of trauma tend to relive occurrences, or at least find that those occurrences intrude on their present existence, for example, in flashbacks or in nightmares or in words that are *compulsively* repeated and that don't seem to have their ordinary meaning, because they're taking on different connotations from another situation, another place. (142-43) (Italics for emphasis.)

So, the process of acting out is linked closely with repetitive compulsions. Alcohol and drug use qualify as repetitive compulsions, but so too could other behaviors (such as reading, cooking, and even gardening). In acting out, a survivor is symbolically repeating—or reliving—a past moment or emotion in the present. And such “intrusions” of the past into the present may seem alarming and out of place to others, for the context of a past event remains in the past and invisible to the outside observer; the past event, though, surfaces to the survivor in the present with full context, intensity, and authenticity. So a survivor of trauma—when compulsively acting out—exists in multiple time planes concurrently. The past self is very much alive in the present.<sup>19</sup> Thus the contradictory attempts at forgetting and remembering a past traumatic event make sense. A survivor of trauma may be uncomfortable or out of place in both the present and the past. His mind may require constant traveling through time. When attempting to flee the present, he must remember the past; and when he attempts to return to the present, he

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19. This is a somewhat Tralfamadorian view of time. For the Tralfamadorians, “All moments, past, present, and future, always have existed, always will exist” (Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, 34). In fact, this Tralfamadorian view of time seems to be somewhat similar to the concepts of time expressed by contemporary scholars of trauma such as Dominick LaCapra and Cathy Caruth.

must forget the past. And one way to achieve such near time-traveling (constant psychic shifting between the past and present) is through the use of mind-altering drugs. Drugs (including alcohol) may temporarily trick the mind into believing that it is in another time or space and may make the past visible in the present; or they may completely obscure the visibility of the past.

But it is unlikely that drugs and alcohol are the only effective catalysts for forgetting or remembering a past hurt. I would argue that certain behaviors—when performed compulsively—can also serve to provoke or silence the past in ways analogous to the effects of drugs and alcohol. For example, an injured veteran may garden religiously (see James Griffin in *Meditations in Green*); a war refugee may prepare food in order to dare memories to surface or silence personal guilt (this could be the case for Thanh or Mrs. Bay in *Monkey Bridge*); or another veteran may write and read about war in order to awaken or silence ghosts from war (as is the case with Kien in *The Sorrow of War*). Such examples serve to show how efforts at forgetting and remembering war exist in the literature of the Vietnam War—and not just those efforts provoked by drugs or alcohol.

For example, in Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge*, Mrs. Bay (a Vietnamese refugee and close friend of Thanh) cooks to evoke memories of war and of Vietnam. At the Mekong Grocery in Little Saigon, Mrs. Bay prepares her infamous rolls, and her food naturally attracts American veterans who are seeking both authentic Vietnamese cooking and a place to discuss Vietnam with others who have been there. Cao makes it clear that the act of cooking results in some level of emotional comfort for Mrs. Bay and the American veterans:

At the Mekong Grocery in Little Saigon, it was Mrs. Bay's job to fry the dough and coat confectioner's sugar on her store-made rolls. She saw solace in the measured order of the grocery, in the unambiguous demands of a recipe, the predictability of yeast, sugar, and flour. But she also had a knack for bestowing solace herself, and it was mostly because of her that the grocery became, over time, a popular gathering place for many American GIs. It was always a special sight to behold: a round bulk of flesh bent in concentration over the store's counter, her chin flat against her chest, her right hand working the floured mixture into an obedience of buttery smoothness. She took pleasure in feeling the butter, sticks of it, dissolve under the force of the spatula and mingle with the yolks, flour, and sugar. She could stir anxiety away this way, in a dimly lit kitchen in the grocery store, while Bill and other regulars—American soldiers—hovered nearby and waited to tell her their stories. (Cao 63-64)

Moreover, Mrs. Bay's cooking leads to the materialization of the equivalent of a multinational "rap group"<sup>20</sup> in which veterans have the ability to *recall* and to "communalize" their war stories. Mrs. Bay's cooking thereby provides an outlet for "substantive validation" to occur, as she—a refugee of the Vietnam War—listens to the stories of others who had experienced the same war. According to Shay, substantive validation occurs when a veteran shares his story of war with a "knowledgeable

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20. The term "rap group" in this context refers to group therapy meetings in which veterans and mental health professionals talk about war and life as a veteran. Such rap groups, while not common, formed while the Vietnam War was still in progress and were often autonomous from the VA or any government institution (Lifton, *Home from the War*, 86).



audience”; such an audience could include anyone who had experienced—and survived—the ordeal of war (168). Mrs. Bay certainly qualifies as a “knowledgeable audience.” After all, both Mrs. Bay (and all Vietnamese refugees living in America) and the veterans who attend the Mekong Grocery (and all Vietnam veterans for that matter) are “custodians of a loss everyone knew about but refused to acknowledge” (Cao 64). Finally, it is hard to know for certain if Mrs. Bay cooks *compulsively*. However, the fact that Mrs. Bay, in the mixing process, is able to “stir anxiety away” suggests that she cooks somewhat habitually, repetitively (daily), ritualistically, hoping the mixture will conjure comforting memories of her homeland.

Certain commonalities surface in the compulsive behaviors—like cooking, for example—found in the literature: they all seem to function as attempts at remembering or forgetting war, or the behaviors serve to allay guilt or culpability in the loss and destruction of the war in Vietnam. Moreover, the compulsive actions also become attempts at bringing back to life someone who has died or been left behind (such as Thanh’s father, Baba Quan) or something that has been destroyed (such as the environment). So in the present chapter I have explored how veteran and refugee characters use drugs, alcohol, and even more innocuous compulsive behaviors to either forget or remember war. In the following chapter, I will show how the postmodern literary techniques common among much of the literature of the Vietnam War are directly connected to both surviving wartime trauma and a profound break in *themis*.

## CHAPTER V

A MILLION WARS AND A MILLION POSTWARS: RESISTING SINGULAR  
CONCEPTIONS OF IDENTITY, DISTRUSTING METANARRATIVE, AND THE  
NECESSITY FOR A POSTMODERN STYLE

“So I [Captain Fahyi Rhallon] am saying to you that after a battle each soldier will have different stories to tell, vastly different stories, and that when a war is ended it is as if there have been a million wars, or as many wars as there were soldiers.” (O’Brien, *Going After Cacciato*, 196)

In *Going After Cacciato*, Captain Fahyi Rhallon asks Doc Peret to speak of his (Doc Peret’s) own war. Doc Peret responds almost indifferently, stating that his war was “Just a war. There’s nothing new to tell” (196). Rhallon, though, challenges Doc’s view. For the captain, no singular war narrative can be trusted to convey the totality of a given war. According to Rhallon, each soldier will perceive a specific battle differently. Similarly, each soldier will bring his/her own past and identity to a war, and these will ultimately shape how he/she experiences a singular moment of combat. However, Rhallon’s argument can be taken a step further: each soldier may remember his/her one story in a million different ways. As such, there may exist a million wars (at least a war for each participant—noncombatants too) and a million postwars (memories of wars that undoubtedly remain fluid). And further still, each one of us (perhaps collectively amounting to millions of listeners and readers) no doubt envisions a unique version of a given war narrative. And we may recall and retell the narrative in millions of different

ways. And so on.<sup>21</sup> Gone is the ability—or the desire—to craft and to accept a singular understanding or metanarrative of war.

Rhallon's idea is undeniably a postmodern one. In defining postmodernity, Jean-Francois Lyotard challenges any consensus seeking to construct a singular experience, knowledge, or truth: "Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity towards metanarrative" (qtd. in Natoli and Hutcheon, *A Postmodern Reader*, 72-73). Moreover, Linda Hutcheon similarly classifies postmodern works as those that challenge the view that one narrative of experience or knowledge is somehow more truthful or warranting of more trust than another. Discounting the credibility of a singular truth, "truths in the plural" prevail (*A Poetics of Postmodernism* 13-18). Hutcheon contends that not only does complete devotion to any singular metanarrative alarm postmodern authors but also that these same writers often, as Michel Foucault noted, also contest "the unified and coherent self" (qtd. in Hutcheon 11-12). In the above epigraph alone, Rhallon challenges a singular metanarrative (a million wars replace a singular war), and he challenges singular perceptions of self by suggesting that each experience—and memory—of war will evolve as soldiers change. So according to Lyotard, Hutcheon, and Foucault, postmodern texts resist—or distrust—any claim that suggests one singular metanarrative (paradigms for truth-finding or world-ordering) or identity remains more accurate, more trustworthy, or more capable of capturing truth than any another.

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21. In *Breakfast of Champions*, Vonnegut accounts for his common use of the phrase "And so on": "The proper ending for any story about people it seems to me, since life is now a polymer in which the Earth is wrapped so tightly, should be that same abbreviation, which I now write large because I feel like it, which is this one: ETC. [Drawn in large capital letters in the text.] And it is in order to acknowledge the continuity of this polymer that I begin so many sentences with 'And' and 'So,' and end so many paragraphs with '. . . and so on.' And so on" (234).

This resistance towards both singular sources of knowledge or History (the “H” capitalized intentionally here, as History itself is a metanarrative) *and* towards singular understandings of self and memory certainly surfaces time and time again in much of the literature of the Vietnam War. Such works as *In the Lake of the Woods* and *The Things They Carried* by Tim O’Brien, *Dispatches* by Michael Herr, and *Meditations in Green* by Stephen Wright illustrate a consistent theme in much of the canon of Vietnam War fiction: a common distrust of one identity, one memory, and one metanarrative. In supporting such a claim, I will approach the subject (the prevalence of the postmodern style) from three directions. First, I will include an evaluation of the common tendency for veteran-authors to present themselves as plural beings to the reader. This becomes most apparent in *The Things They Carried*, as O’Brien emerges as both the actual author of—and a fictional character within—his novel. Secondly, I will consider the common aversion to a singular metanarrative as a trustworthy vehicle accounting for the complexity—and uncertainty—of the Vietnam War. Such an aversion emerges in multiple ways, from a seemingly endless retelling of one moment of combat from different perspectives to meditations on the inadequacies of applying Western constructs of space, time, and geography to an obviously non-Western landscape. Finally, in a concluding section, I will provide one explanation for the emergence of this postmodern distrust for rigid perceptions of history, memory, and identity. As veterans themselves have, of course, written most of the defining fictional works of the Vietnam War, it may be useful to examine how the experience of combat and war likely shaped their seemingly deep distrust of traditional narrative forms of writing. Placing this seeming postmodern predisposition for distrust within contemporary theories on combat trauma

yields useful findings. It seems that such a literary postmodern style/approach may in fact be a direct manifestation of surviving combat trauma: many soldiers went to war as modern, *trusting* Americans, experienced some sort of betrayal in war by institutions or persons whom they trusted fully, and emerged as uncertain, questioning, and perhaps distrusting veterans. And this trajectory surfaces fully in much of the literature.

However, before investigating the aversion to singular metanarratives, identity, and memory, it is useful to examine the critical debate surrounding the appropriateness of labeling the Vietnam War as a postmodern war. As I have suggested above, the literature of the war often undoubtedly reflects central aspects of the postmodern style (“incredulity towards metanarrative” and a contesting of “the unified and coherent self”). In addition, scholars have recognized the fact that the postmodern movement and the Vietnam War emerged as “congruent and mutually constitutive historical phenomena” (Bibby ix). So it would make sense that the war that serves as the central subject—or background—of many postmodern texts would, in fact, be a decidedly postmodern conflict. No such complete consensus exists, but the majority of scholars classify the war as a postmodern event which gave rise to postmodern fiction (Carpenter 31). At first glance, the Vietnam War certainly seems to have been a postmodern war: traditional demarcations of battlefield lines and enemy combatants dissolved; weaponry emerged as a conflation of man and machine; combatants emerged in multiple forms: soldiers, Department of Defense and CIA agents, nurses, spies, commandos, civilians, etc. (Bibby 178); American mass culture emerged as ubiquitous, including Armed Forces T.V. and radio, personal stereos, and American beer and food; constant uncertainty and ambiguity prevailed in regard to mission objectives and mission success; a seeming “hallucinatory

mood” also emerged, complete with significant drug use (Neilson 195); and of course the juxtaposing of danger and discomfort during jungle combat patrols with the relative safety and comfort of secure military bases (Carpenter 34).

Other scholars see the war as a modern conflict that produced modern war narratives. According to this line of thought, novelists present the Vietnam War by using the modern, linear literary war narrative form that shows a soldier’s journey from innocence to experience and from experience to disillusionment, suggesting that only the technology, participants, and geography have changed, while the model of the war narrative remains static (Bibby 35). Furthermore, such critics may even go as far as to label the first U.S.-Iraq war as the first “real” postmodern conflict (Bibby xv). Nevertheless, the Vietnam War is decidedly postmodern in that it materialized as unavoidably fragmented. Even the justification for and the nature of the war are open to question: Was the conflict a civil war? Was it an “anticolonial revolution”? What about a war for national independence? How about a war of faith (Catholicism vs. Buddhism)? Or, did the war emerge as a more modern construct within the Cold War conflict between democracy and communism? (Bibby 180) Le Ly Hayslip has acknowledged this fractured nature of the war directly: “Most of you [Americans] did not know, or fully understand, the different wars my people were fighting when you got here” (qtd. in Bates 5-6). Hayslip reveals the U.S. tendency to reduce the conflict to a model (good vs. evil/democracy vs. communism) that Americans (and their active, Western allies<sup>22</sup> in the war: New Zealand and Australia) can understand and with which they feel comfortable.

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22. Other U.S. allies included South Korea and, of course, South Vietnam.

Critic Michael Bibby sees the postmodern labeling of the war as especially problematic and limiting, because it tends to reduce the conflict to one that can be understood within the context of a cultural movement and thereby seemingly ignores its unique historical position: “. . . to term the war ‘post-modernist,’ then is to colonize the war under the cultural; to subsume it under a critical sign, a name for the various modes of cultural practices we have come to recognize as the post-modern; to restrict the war under this name; to repress its historicity in the name of a unifying signifier” (Bibby 31). Certainly the literature of the war evolved as the war progressed. Early works (which predominately present the war before the January 1968 Tet Offensive, such as Philip Caputo’s *A Rumor of War*) follow a more “modern,” linear paradigm, while later texts (such as O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*) provide decidedly more fractured and shifting narrative forms.

The Multiple Tim O’Briens, John Wades, and Michael Herrs: Postmodern Voice  
and Identity

Critical debate aside, a common tendency for veteran-authors to present characters or themselves through many voices and identities remains a defining postmodern stylistic feature of much of Vietnam War literature. These multiple voices become especially apparent in *The Things They Carried*, *Dispatches*, and *In the Lake of the Woods*. Tim O’Brien presents *The Things They Carried* as “a work of fiction,” yet the story almost immediately causes some confusion, as the protagonist—and narrator—of the novel is also named Tim O’Brien. However, this narrator-O’Brien remains a fictional

character who just happens to share the same name as the author. Moreover, the inclusion of many truthful details in the novel from O'Brien's actual life further blurs the line between reality and fiction *and* O'Brien and "O'Brien." For example, in the chapter/story "On the Rainy River," O'Brien the recent Macalester College graduate travels north to the Canadian border and struggles with the decision of whether to go to war or not; Tim O'Brien actually went to Macalester, and he too battled with the question of whether to fight in a war he opposed morally. In addition to the somewhat overlapping yet distinct author/protagonist voices, other O'Brien identities and voices emerge in *The Things They Carried*. O'Brien, the grunt who recounts and retells memories and stories of war, is a ubiquitous force, while O'Brien, the forty-three-year-old veteran-author-father also surfaces in the story: "I'm forty-three years old, a writer now, and the war has been over a long while. Much of it is hard to remember. I sit at this typewriter and stare through my words . . ." (O'Brien 32). So the voices in *The Things They Carried* are multiple, span many years, and constantly call into question and blur the line between truth and fiction.

The identity of the protagonist, John Wade, in O'Brien's *In the Lake of Woods* also lacks cohesion. After serving in Vietnam—and participating in the atrocity of Thuan Yen—Wade returns home and eventually runs for political office. However, he loses the election when his involvement at Thuan Yen comes to light, and he retreats with his wife, Kathy, to a remote cabin on the border of the Lake of the Woods. Kathy then disappears (perhaps having been murdered by Wade or perhaps leaving on her own accord), and the reader is left uncertain as to both Kathy's whereabouts and to the reasons for Wade's eventual decision to travel north into the obscurity of the lake. But as with the character of O'Brien *In the Things They Carried*, Wade's persona fluctuates between various



prewar, wartime, and postwar identities. Wade's varying identities include a politician, a "sorcerer" (conjuring the illusionary powers of mirrors in his mind to reshape history and memory), a veteran who may have killed his wife, a survivor of trauma (both the trauma of war and the trauma of dealing with his own father's suicide), a deserted husband, and a grunt who fought with Charlie Company in Vietnam. And furthering this multitude of selves, Wade even goes so far as to alter official military records, thereby removing his name from the roll of one military unit and entering it on the roll of another:

He went to the files and dug out a thick folder of morning reports for Charlie Company. Over the next two hours he made the necessary changes, mostly retyping, some scissors work, removing his name from each document and carefully tidying up the numbers . . . Around midnight he began the more difficult task of reassigning himself to Alpha Company. He went back to the day of his arrival in country, doing the math in reverse, adding his name to the muster rolls, promoting himself, awarding the appropriate medals on the appropriate dates. (O'Brien 269)

With the illusion complete, Wade could on some level distance himself (in official records, at least) from the guilt and trauma of the terrible day at Thuan Yen. And he even decides to promote himself and awards himself several medals. So after the war, there are multiple Wades (maybe more) who served in Vietnam: the Wade who actually fought with Charlie Company; the Wade who was known to his comrades only as "Sorcerer"; and the false Wade who, in records only, served in Alpha Company.

Michael Herr in *Dispatches* also presents his own identity as plural and evolving. Herr's work is certainly more memoir than fiction, as he constructs a somewhat

psychedelic recollection of his time in Vietnam as a war correspondent. In fact, his work can be read as something of a drug-induced trip in itself. For example, the titles of the opening and closing chapters “Breathing In” and “Breathing Out” suggest marijuana use. Herr enters the war as a reporter who wants to maintain objectivity, but it becomes clear to him that maintaining objectivity and the singular identity of a reporter in a conflict such as the Vietnam War is exceedingly difficult. Herr’s identity ultimately becomes undeniably plural: he is all at once (or at varying moments) an objective reporter, a fully subjective journalist, a combatant, someone who is shocked by the destruction of combat, someone who recognizes the beauty in coordinated military assaults, someone who loves (and perhaps is addicted to) war, and someone who despises war (Carpenter 40). For example, in recalling watching American ordnance hitting possible North Vietnamese Army (NVA) positions, Herr muses, “And at night it was beautiful. Even the incoming was beautiful at night, beautiful and deeply dreadful” (Herr 132). Similarly, Herr reveals that war can be both repellent and attractive:

There were some [reporters] who couldn’t make it and left after a few days, some who couldn’t make it the other way, staying year after year, trying to piece together their very real hatred of the war with their great love for it, that rough reconciliation that many of us had to look at. (221)

The above passage seems to suggest that some kind of an appreciation for war and destruction may have been prerequisites to surviving and thriving as a reporter in Vietnam.

Perhaps the most noticeable evolution in identity occurs when Herr crosses the line between objective-reporter-witness to active participant in war. In exchanging the

reporter's pen (or typewriter) for the warrior's rifle (or machine gun), Herr crosses over to the other "end of the story":

We covered each other, an exchange of services that worked all right until one night when I slid over to the wrong end of the story, propped up behind some sandbags at an airstrip in Can Tho with a .30-caliber automatic in my hands, firing cover for a four-man reaction team trying to get back in. (67)

It is clear that, as a reporter of the Vietnam War, Herr struggled to hold true to the "traditional" journalistic goal of complete objectivity. Instead, a form of New Journalism became common that often "abandon[ed] all pretense of impersonal objectivity, substituting instead intense subjectivity" (Carpenter 36). During his time as a reporter in Vietnam, Herr's identities multiply. Fear, love, hate, objectivity, subjectivity, destruction, and beauty all surrounded his experience, and each reaction created new, evolving voices and senses of self.

#### Distrust of Metanarrative

Similar to the shifting identities explored above, any attempt at applying a singular metanarrative to the Vietnam War—and one's memory of the war—certainly becomes suspect, as the war's literature attests. Perhaps this distrust of metanarrative and the gravitation towards more fragmented stylistic approaches resulted, in part, from the fragmented nature of the Vietnam War itself, as "straightforward" wars and "messy" wars produce (supposedly) entirely different novels: "Straightforward wars are built like

novels. They begin here, go to there, swell and subside along the way. Messy wars, like the one we fought in Vietnam, lend themselves more readily to fragmented narratives” (qtd. by Peter Prescott, Neilson 194). So, perhaps “traditional,” “modern” wars (maybe like the “total war” paradigm of WWII) lend themselves to a linear form, while the infinite uncertainty of the Vietnam War (as a “limited” war) inevitably produced works that challenge the certainty of a traditional form of narration (such as the linear combat narrative). Such “straightforward,” “clean” wars often appear tractable, seemingly wholly understandable, with clear enemies, losers, victors, beginning dates, and ending dates. The Vietnam War, though, resists finite historical classification. For example, neither a clear beginning nor a clear ending to the war in Vietnam surfaces: Did the U.S. war in Vietnam begin with the fall of Dien Bien Phu? Did it start with the arrival of the first American advisors? Or did the Gulf of Tonkin incident mark the beginning? Or, what about when the first Marines landed? Did it end in 1973 with the Paris Peace Accords? Or in 1975 with the fall of Saigon to NVA forces? Or maybe the war ended in 1991 when George H. Bush declared the U.S. has “kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all” (Neilson 205).

Perhaps the most visible manifestation of this aversion to a singular metanarrative emerges in *The Things They Carried* in the form of the telling and retelling of a singular story of war in multitudinous ways. In the chapter “How to Tell a True War Story,” O’Brien provides a “truthful” account of a war story in which Curt Lemon, a fellow soldier, steps on a “booby-trapped 105 round” and is obliterated. O’Brien retells the same story several different times, and in each recounting he provides new details and constructs a seemingly new narrative of the one, singular incident. First, O’Brien writes

of Rat Kiley and Curt Lemon “goofing” around and playing catch with an active smoke grenade. Lemon then steps from the shade and into the sunlight and is blown into a tree. This is the truth of Lemon’s death, as O’Brien makes clear: “It’s all exactly true” (70). However, another account of the soldier’s death soon complicates the “truth,” and this one is less poetic and more concise: “We crossed that river and marched west into the mountains. On the third day, Curt Lemon stepped on a booby-trapped 105-round. He was playing catch with Rat Kiley, laughing, and then he was dead. The trees were thick; it took nearly an hour to cut an LZ for the dustoff” (78). In the third recounting of the war story, O’Brien presents a final, more complete and harrowing narrative in which the booby-trapped round blew Lemon apart and into the branches of a nearby tree. “O’Brien” and Dave Jensen were then tasked with removing Lemon’s remains from the tree:

The parts were just hanging there, so Dave Jensen and I were ordered to shinny up and peel him off. I remember the white bone of an arm. I remember pieces of skin and something wet and yellow that must have been intestines. The gore was horrible, and it stays with me. But what wakes me up twenty years later is Dave Jensen singing ‘Lemon Tree’ as we threw down the parts. (83)

O’Brien challenges the trustworthiness of a singular narrative of a singular moment of war. The story must be retold and retold again, and each distinct retelling offers sincerity and a sense of truthfulness that the other stories cannot. Much as in O’Brien’s retelling of Lemon’s death, not only does the war itself resist a singular historical narrative, but soldiers’ individual stories and memories of combat similarly resist a static, linear, and distinctive narrative. The truth of the war is too complex, and uncertainty is inescapable.

O'Brien also challenges the absolute certainty of metanarrative in *In The Lake of the Woods*. Throughout the novel, O'Brien includes eight separate hypotheses, each providing discrete explanations for Kathy's disappearance. Not only does the novel leave the reader uncertain, but each hypothesis also offers an outcome that seems wholly viable and trustworthy. Did the couple together perform a final act of misdirection and leave the country without a trace to begin a life overseas in Verona? Did Wade boil water in a tea kettle and then slowly pour the burning water over Kathy's head, killing her, and then leaving her body in Lake of the Woods? Did Kathy leave Wade for another man? Did she commit suicide? Did she accidentally get lost while on a solo voyage exploring the lake? Who's to say? Who's to know? Each story is possible, and no one truth is presented as specifically more accurate than another. Here, like in *The Things They Carried*, Lyotard's "incredulity towards metanarrative" surfaces—just in a new form.

One final example of the propensity to distrust metanarrative among Vietnam War literature may prove useful. In Stephen Wright's *Meditations in Green*, protagonist "Griffin, James I. 451 55 0366 SP4 P96D2T" has the job assignment of sorting through and studying—day after day—aerial photos from reconnaissance aircraft that depict the Vietnamese terrain both before and after recent U.S. bombing missions. As part of the 1069<sup>th</sup> Intelligence Group, he is tasked with converting bomb craters and foreign landscapes into measurable data and statistics:

His job was to interpret the film, find the enemy in the negatives. He turned the crank. Trees, trees, trees, trees, rocks, rocks, cloud, trees, trees, road, road, stream, stream, ford, trees, road, road. He stopped the cranking. With a black grease pencil he carefully circled two blurry shadows beside

the white thread of the road. Next to the circles he placed question marks. Road, road, road, road, trees, trees, trees. His eyes felt hard as shells, sore as bruises. Trees, trees, trees, trees. Wherever he put circles on the film there the air force would make holes in the ground. (43)

The Vietnamese landscape, though, naturally resists American military constructs of mapping and labeling (Ringnalda 53). In addition, Griffin has the god-like ability to order ordnance on any target he deems potentially dangerous: what Griffin circles, the Air Force will be sure to bomb. So through Griffin's work, the U.S. Army is trying to apply its own paradigms of world-ordering to the Vietnamese landscape and the war in general. This is essentially a metanarrative composed of empirical grids, charts, endless intelligence reports, and data. The U.S. military assumed the war was measurable and the landscape could be divided, subdivided, and conquered. The U.S. military assumed its models of world-ordering and truth-finding would make the war winnable, comprehensible, perhaps modern, and maybe even American. The seemingly endless gridding, subdividing, marking, circling, graphing, and charting that surrounded U.S. military efforts in Vietnam proved ultimately unsuccessful. Michael Herr in *Dispatches* also recalls a similar effort by America's MACV (Military Assistance Command Vietnam) to divide, subdivide, and diagram the war. Herr, as he looks at an old French map of Vietnam on the wall of his Saigon apartment, realizes the U.S. military makes virtually the same mistakes in mapping and diagramming the Vietnamese landscape that the French had made previously:

There was a map of Vietnam on the wall of my apartment in Saigon and some nights, coming back late to the city, I'd lie out on my

bed and look at it, too tired to do anything more than just get my boots off. That map was a marvel, especially now that it wasn't real anymore. For one thing, it was very old. It had been left there years before by another tenant, probably a Frenchman, since the map had been made in Paris. The paper had buckled in its frame after years in the wet Saigon heat, laying a kind of veil over the countries it depicted. Vietnam was divided into its older territories of Tonkin, Annam and Cochin China, and to the west past Laos and Cambodge [sic.] sat Siam, a kingdom. That's old. I'd tell visitors, that's a really old map.

If dead ground could come back and haunt you the way dead people do, they'd have been able to mark my map CURRENT and burn the ones they'd been using since '64, but count on it, nothing like that was going to happen. It was late '67 now, even the most detailed maps didn't reveal much anymore; reading them was like trying to read the faces of the Vietnamese, and that was like trying to read the wind. We knew that the uses of most information were flexible, different pieces of ground told different stories to different people. We also knew for years now that there had been no country here but the war. (3)

So, the French had previously divided Vietnam into three districts: Tonkin, Annam, and Cochin China (Young, *The Vietnam Wars*, 2). Later, the U.S. military would, during its war in Vietnam, divide the landscape similarly: "I Corps," "II Corps," "III Corps," and "IV Corps."



The Postmodern War Novel: A Manifestation of Combat Trauma?

Clearly, Vietnam War literature mostly eschews the singular identity and metanarrative as a means to convey the truth of a war and a soldier's memories of the conflict. This fact calls to mind several questions: From whence did this deep distrust originate? Why is this postmodern propensity for distrust of "modern" constructs of knowledge and truth so intense? Is recovery from this broken trust possible or even desirable? Will we (collectively here) be able to trust fully again any other paradigms of truth? Are all postmodern stylistic choices manifestations of this inability to trust? A brief venture into recent history may provide some answers. It seems as though the horrors of WWII (such as the Holocaust and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and even the fire-bombing of Dresden) shook conceptions of good and evil, of the morality of mankind, and of the underlying "Western" constructs of society and culture from which these violent catastrophes emerged. And both "good guys" and "bad guys" committed atrocities. Perhaps the Vietnam War, which featured such horrors as the massacre at My Lai and the widespread use of Agent Orange, continued to shake the collective consciousness of the "Western" world. Most certainly these events collectively led to a wide scale rift in social trust, and this break is manifested, in part, as postmodernism in art and literature. After all, can one fully accept notions of truth, morality, and goodness when the supposed agents of good ultimately led the world toward such destruction?

Placing the postmodern predisposition for distrust within contemporary theories on combat trauma yields some valuable results. For instance, Shay suggests that a broken capacity for social trust is a direct manifestation (and the most detrimental one at that) of

combat trauma, and a “broken” ability to trust may invade one’s personal relationships, family, job, perceptions of governmental institutions, or even perceptions of one’s surroundings and views of safety; no one should be trusted outright, and those institutions (especially the ones that claim to be looking out for you, the VA for example) remain suspect certainly. This is a learned adaptation aimed at survival and self-protection; after all, a past *trust* in an institution may have led to loss, death, betrayal, and destruction (Shay, *Odysseus in America*, 150-51). And for Shay, a break in *themis*, when combined with a moment of combat trauma (death, injury, horror, for example), may easily initiate a lost capacity for social trust and lifelong, chronic PTSD (Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*, 3-21). For example, a veteran may have such a reaction: “I *trusted* that the Army would send a med-evac helicopter to rescue my injured and dying buddy; help never came, though. They said such a rescue mission would be too dangerous.” This would be an outright moment of betrayal of *themis* combined with death and injury. The Army failed morally to fulfill its side of an unwritten contract by not sending help. The soldiers risked their lives for the same institution that would not venture into danger to save them. And by not sending help, the Army devalued the lives of the soldiers in danger.

The postmodern movement—marked by a broken capacity for trust—may have emerged as a direct manifestation of trauma. However, the distrust surfaced not at the individual level but on the national, cultural level. The destruction and horrors of WWII and Vietnam certainly can be perceived as clashing with conceptions of what is morally righteous. Postmodernism may therefore denote a national trauma. It emerged, in part, out of the stress of learning and coming to terms with the potential for destruction that may have resulted from “Western” paradigms of truth and world ordering. Both PTSD

and postmodernism share a partial terminology (the “Post”). Many soldiers who fought in WWII or Vietnam went to war with an idealistic world-view only to emerge from war as postmodern, distrusting veterans. This fact may help to explain the vividly postmodern style of much—though not all—of Vietnam War literature. And those who did not experience these wars first-hand certainly internalized the loss and destruction of these conflicts in similar ways. The traumas—individual and national/collective—shattered Americans’ trust in their own constructions of truth and what is righteous, resulting in postmodern literature. Thus, like all symptoms of PTSD, postmodern literature is an adaptation (on a collective and cultural—not individual—level) that helps to secure survival and safety after the often-traumatic experience of war. If Americans remain distrustful of constructs of truth and of those in power, they may avoid injury, betrayal, or culpability in destruction. The postmodern world protects itself through a heightened state of questioning and distrust. Postmodernism is, then, a survival mechanism.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis has demonstrated some of the most profound and debilitating ways in which combat trauma manifests itself in the postwar lives of those who witnessed—or participated in—the Vietnam War, regardless of ideology, nationality, gender, or religion. Specifically, this work has focused on four expressions of combat trauma that surface with regularity in the literature of the Vietnam War: staying in combat mode; a reliance on the tactics of misdirection and misrepresentation; a dependence on drugs, alcohol, and compulsive behaviors; and an embracing of the postmodern literary style. Collectively, these postwar manifestations of combat trauma confirm that the fictional record of the Vietnam War remains exceedingly valuable in helping to understand reactions to—and attempts at recovering from—traumatic experiences.

The first chapter of this thesis examines some of the most influential, contemporary works on trauma theory, combat trauma, and PTSD, including Freudian theory, the works of Shay, Caruth, and LaCapra, and the findings of the American Psychiatric Association. This opening chapter provides a theoretical background for the rest of the chapters and suggests that one reaction to surviving trauma in particular unites all contemporary understandings/definitions of combat trauma: a psychic, repetitive reliving of a traumatic moment(s). The second, third, and fourth chapters of this thesis show three common, postwar manifestations of combat trauma found in the literature of the Vietnam War. The tendency to stay in combat mode is the subject of chapter two. The chapter specifically examines how survivors of war may remain combat-ready after war in several ways: through the continued use combat survival skills; through distrust of their surrounding physical environment; and by viewing/treating aspects of civilian life as

combat missions. The third chapter focuses on another common manifestation of surviving war trauma: a reliance on misdirection and self misrepresentation. The central motive behind sustained use of misdirection and misrepresentation, the third chapter suggests, is self-protection; through the use of these tactics (misrepresenting self and misdirecting others) survivors of war are often striving to identify—and keep at a distance—those who may betray or hurt them. The fourth chapter of this thesis considers how the use of drugs and alcohol among survivors of war is, in fact, directly related to a war survivor's quest to either forget or remember distressing memories of war. Similarly, the fourth chapter also explores how war survivors may also perform certain behaviors (cooking, for example) compulsively in order to achieve the same goals of either forgetting or remembering war. The fifth and final chapter of this thesis argues that the common use of postmodern literary techniques among authors who write about the Vietnam War and its aftermath can best be understood as yet another direct reaction to surviving the traumatic ordeal of war. Moreover, this final chapter focuses on two postmodern stylistic features in particular: a resistance to a singular presentation of self and a distrust of metanarrative.

Like the literature of the Vietnam War, it seems likely that the literary works now emerging in response to America's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan will be equally valuable in aiding the collective scholarly quest to more fully understand PTSD (or psychological combat injuries and the manifestations of these injuries). More specifically, this present study could serve as the basis for a future exploration of the literature, film, poetry, and art emerging in response to the recent American wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, maybe an analysis of how the trauma manifestations included in Vietnam War literature compare

with those that may be found in Iraq and Afghanistan war literature. Essentially, that study would seek to answer a series of questions: Do the specific combat expressions described in this thesis also surface among contemporary war literature? What—if any—new reactions to combat trauma can be found that are unique to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan? How are—and to what extent—contemporary veteran authors in dialogue with (or responding to) their Vietnam War predecessors? Do the novels emerging in response to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan follow the postmodern style so visible in much of the literature of the Vietnam War? Or, have contemporary authors embraced a new authorial style that is unique to both the modern and postmodern war novel?

Sometimes—actually more often than we may realize—our research topics choose us. I, of course, did not decide to write two theses on combat trauma and the history and literature of the Vietnam War randomly. If I had, that would have been somewhat worrisome, right? But don't worry. It's okay. My father fought with the U.S. infantry in Vietnam, and like thousands and thousands of other veterans (American and Vietnamese) of that war, he struggled with his memories of war. Needed treatment for the devastating post-combat condition (that we now commonly label as PTSD) was not widely available during the 1970s and '80s. As such, many veterans, like my father (and perhaps like Odysseus too), navigated a troubled homecoming in which distressing memories could not be worked through or communalized. And like many other veterans, unhealed combat-related psychological wounds eventually contributed to my father's

early death. This topic chose me a long time ago. He died in 1987. I was four, and my brother was six. So it goes.<sup>23</sup>

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23. This is a famous Kurt Vonnegut line. “So it goes” is the Tralfamadorian response to death.

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