Tim O’Brien and the topography of trauma

This item was submitted to Loughborough University’s Institutional Repository by the/an author.


Metadata Record: https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/15937

Version: Submitted for publication

Publisher: © Routledge

Rights: This work is made available according to the conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) licence. Full details of this licence are available at: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/

Please cite the published version.
Skating on a shit field: 
Tim O’Brien and the topography of trauma

Brian Jarvis

Over the past twenty years, two of the most conspicuous trends in the humanities have been the ‘turn to trauma’ and the ‘spatial turn’. ‘Trauma’ and ‘space’ have each been the site of a significant interdisciplinary convergence involving literary and film studies, history and cultural geography, psychoanalysis and feminism. At the same time and somewhat surprisingly there has been relatively little exploration of the intersections between trauma and space. Of course there have been exceptions (Pierre Nora’s pioneering work on lieux de mémoire (Nora 1996-8), Geoffrey Hartman’s readings of place in Wordsworth (Hartman 2004) and Anne Whitehead’s study of landscape in contemporary fiction (Whitehead 2004)) but, in general terms, trauma has been conceived as a matter of time. Trauma theory, especially where it intersects with Holocaust Studies, has displayed a marked preoccupation with crises in temporality and historiography, memory and moments. It would be well beyond the scope of this essay to offer an explanatory model for the spatial crises of trauma, but I do intend to gesture towards the ways in which trauma might take place. In literary representation, trauma appears as an event horizon that folds geographical referents into itself. The traumatic experience devours space and confuses coordinates through a cascade of displacements that prohibit (en)closure and jeopardise the very concept of a coherent topography. Consequently, in place of a lucid mapping of trauma, I intend to offer a cautionary tramautology of topos through a close reading of spaces in Tim O’Brien’s Vietnam novel, *The Things They Carried* (1990).

*Inter faeces et urinam nascimur*

Vietnam Vietnam Vietnam, we’ve all been there.  

(Herr 1978: 207)

Whenever a man dreams of a place or a country and says to himself, while he is dreaming: ‘this place is familiar to me, I’ve been here before’ we may interpret that place as being his mother’s genitals or body.  

(Freud 2003b: 64)
The first place that is mapped by O’Brien is the first place. ‘In country’ is rendered as a gynaecological geography. No women carry babies in The Things They Carried, but the maternal imago haunts a landscape of fecund jungle, intrauterine tunnels and invaginating fox holes, swamps, rivers and a shit field (to which we will return shortly). Following a journey over water, the tour of duty is simultaneously sutured with the primal displacement of birth trauma and thalassic regression (the psychoanalytical term for dreams of oceans and smaller inland seas that might symbolise life in the womb):

All around you, everywhere, the whole dark countryside came alive. You’d hear a strange hum in your ears... Like the night had its own voice - that hum in your ears - and in the hours after midnight you’d swear you were walking through some kind of soft black protoplasm, Vietnam, the blood and the flesh (O’Brien 1991: 217).

The more dead bodies it claims, the more this devouring womb comes to life. Vietnam, the vampyress, sucks soldiers down into the blood-soaked soil, the undergrowth, the rice paddies and primeval swamp. In the opening title story, ‘The Things They Carried’, Alpha Company is ordered to explore the ‘elaborate tunnel complexes in the Than Khe area south of Chu Lai’(9). After stripping off his gear, a lone soldier ‘crawl[s] in headfirst... you had to wiggle in – ass and elbows – a swallowed-up feeling’(10). Confinement is followed, if lucky, by a subsequent surfacing ‘filthy, but alive’(11). The rest of the men avoid ‘facing the hole’, but cannot help imagining ‘the tunnel walls squeezing in’ (9-10). When one of his men fails to surface, platoon leader Jimmy Cross imagines a tunnel collapse which then elides with a fantasy about his girlfriend, Martha:

The stresses and the fractures, the quick collapse, the two of them buried alive under all that weight. Dense, crushing love... his love was too much for him, he felt paralyzed, he wanted to sleep inside her lungs and breathe her blood and be smothered (10).

To escape from the dark continent of ‘Nam’s interior, Cross dreams of uterine flight back to his American sweetheart. We are not told Martha’s surname, but perhaps, given O’Brien’s extravagant psychoanalytical self-consciousness, it might be Bernays
(the maiden name of Martha Freud, whose courtship with Sigmund, like that of Martha and Jimmy Cross, began with the exchange of love letters).

In the Than Khe tunnels, Cross’s missing soldier, Lee Strunk, returns. Later, however, the platoon is devastated by the loss of another man, Kiowa, in the key location for O’Brien’s mapping of Vietnam as the monstrous feminine. This site is introduced in the traumatized recollections of Norman Bowker as he drives round his hometown lake, ‘hopelessly round and round’ (146), whilst compulsively replaying memories of his inability to save Kiowa from drowning in a ‘shit field’. Bowker recalls that after the October monsoons, the Song Tra Bong, ‘a slow flat muddy river... overflowed its banks and the land turned into a deep, thick muck... Like quicksand, almost, except the stink was incredible’(142-3). On night patrol, in torrential rain, Alpha Company make camp in this ‘deep, oozy soup’ despite the rising slime and olfactory offensive: ‘a dead-fish smell – but it was something else, too. Finally somebody figured it out. What this was, it was a shit field. The village toilet. No indoor plumbing’(145). When the company comes under mortar fire the ‘[t]he field [starts] boiling... earth bubbled’ (147). Kiowa is wounded and Bowker tries forlornly to save him from drowning: ‘he grabbed Kiowa by the boot and tried to pull him out. He pulled hard but Kiowa was gone’ (148). Bowker manages, slowly and painfully, to extract himself from the earth, caked in muck and with the taste of shit fresh in his mouth. The psychogeography of this scene suggests antipodal birth traumas in the \textit{anus mundi}: one ‘newborn’ survives to be haunted by meconium aspiration (when a baby swallows its own faeces during labour), but the other undergoes a rectal absorption which recalls Freud’s ‘cloaca theory’ (a misconception amongst some children that women have only one pelvic orifice and birth occurs through the anus). Following an intensive search the next day a second anal parturition takes place in which three men pull Kiowa’s dead body out of the shit field by his feet: a breach extraction with the stillborn coated in the ‘bluish-green’ slime of mother earth’s decidua (172). In the ‘Notes’ that follow ‘Speaking of Courage’, Bowker’s story becomes ‘O’Brien’s’ (as character-narrator) and the shit field becomes an abject geographical microcosm for the war itself: ‘For twenty years this field had embodied all the waste that was Vietnam, all the vulgarity and horror’ (186).
In *Male Fantasies*, Klaus Theweleit examines the literature of the *Freikorps* (various paramilitary groups formed in Germany by veterans of World War One) and uncovers the recurring image of an ‘anthropomorphized body of Mother Earth that devours, flows and erupts’ (Theweleit 1987: 238). This conceit is so conspicuous in inter-war fascist writing that Theweleit contends ‘[t]his is no longer a matter of war. The war simply creates a means for expressing the desire for – and fear of – being swallowed up by the earth’ (239). The fantasy of the oral mother projected onto the battlefield is part of a generalized gender anxiety apparent within the libidinal economy of war. Military power seeks to colonise the soldier’s gender identity and develop a militarised body that must be permanently hard and function with mechanical efficiency. The skin is replaced by armour and spontaneous movements exchanged for precise geometrical patterns. This paradigm entails a pathologizing of the non-military corpus: anything ‘soft’, or ‘wet’ is

negativized to such an extent that they [become] the physical manifestations of all that [is] terrifying... all the hybrid substances that were produced by the body and flowed on, in, over, and out of the body: the floods and stickiness of sucking kisses; the swamps of the vagina, with their slime and mire; the pap and slime of male semen; the film of sweat that settles on the stomach, thighs, and in the anal crevice, and that turns two pelvic regions into a sub-tropical landscape (410).

The secret enemy is the anima (a term from Jungian psychoanalysis that signifies the femininity which is typically repressed in the male unconscious). The soldier, trained to be at war with physical and psychological manifestations of the feminine, carries around his own occupied territories. The hyperbolic masculinity imposed by military discipline ensures that trauma is inseparable from the corporeal cartographies of gender identity.

**Indian Country**

The words that cannot be uttered, the scenes that cannot be recalled, the tears that cannot be shed – everything will be swallowed along with the trauma that led to the loss. Swallowed and preserved. Inexpressible mourning erects a secret tomb inside the subject. Reconstituted from the memories of words, scenes, and affects, the objective correlative of the loss is buried alive in the crypt as a full-fledged person, complete with its own topography.
A traumatic crisis in cartography and gender identity is evident in ‘Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong’. When Mary Anne Bell audaciously visits her boyfriend, Mark Fossie, in ‘Nam, she undergoes a dramatic metamorphosis from all-American girl to predatory Amazonian. Fresh from ‘Cleveland Heights Senior High’, Mary Anne initially boosts morale and entertains the troops (90). Gradually, however, she stops being something to look at and starts to look for herself: at the wounds and the weapons, the Vietnamese people and the jungle. She stops using make-up, removes her jewelry, cuts her hair short and eventually joins the Green Berets on ambush. Her boyfriend complains that her body is changing: it has become ‘foreign somehow - too stiff in places, too firm where the softness used to be’ (94). Fossie suspects infidelity and his suspicions are founded although Mary Anne has not been unfaithful with another soldier, rather she has been seduced by the Land itself: ‘[s]ometimes I want to eat this place. Vietnam. I want to swallow the whole country - the dirt, the death - I just want to eat it and have it there inside me’ (103). Whilst the male soldiers dread incorporation, Mary Anne goes deeper and dissolves into myth:

[She] was still somewhere out there in the dark... Late at night, when the Greenies were out on ambush, the rain forest seemed to stare at them... She had crossed to the other side. She was part of the land. She was wearing her culottes, her pink sweater, and a necklace of human tongues (107).

Mary Anne’s distinctive accessory recalls the taking of body parts – ears, fingers, even heads – as trophies by US soldiers in Vietnam. However, when the necklace first appears its wearer is singing in a ‘foreign tongue’ which echoes Fossie’s earlier complaint regarding Mary Anne’s ‘foreign body’. When the innocent all-American girl arrives in ‘Nam she is pure red, white and blue: ‘long white legs and blue eyes and a complexion like strawberry ice cream’ (90). Mary Anne’s subsequent transformation into primitive killer is accompanied by a stripping of her national and racial identity that is perhaps hinted at by the place name with which the ‘Sweetheart’ is associated: as an adjective bong means ‘snow white’ but as a verb it signifies the act of ‘peeling’. The ex-Snow White darkens her skin with charcoal for camouflage and exchanges Cleveland Heights for an ‘exotic smokehouse’ that reeks of ‘joss sticks and incense’, where the windows dance with bright ‘yellows’ in time to ‘bamboo flutes and drums
and chimes’ and Mary Anne’s own incomprehensible chanting (102). In the Dragon Lady’s lair patriarchal and colonialist topographies are super-imposed. US versions of Vietnam, in fiction and film, frequently indulge in Orientalist mappings of East and West as mythical antipodes: feminine and masculine, irrational and rational, primitive and civilized. A retreat into geographical mysticism ‘discovers’ Vietnam as an Eastern ‘Garden of Evil’ (76).

In The Things They Carried, Vietnam is colonized as primeval shit field in a topography which is both Orientalist and gothic. O’Brien marshals an inventory of gothic topoi: the body in danger, possession and haunting, ghosts and secrets and uncanny elisions between inside and outside, living and dead, womb and tomb. The centripetal shit field might be approached as a ‘crypt’ as defined by Abraham and Torok in their gothic revision of classical psychoanalysis. Although ‘the crypt marks a definite place in the topography’ it is not easily located since it is always ‘encrypted’ and seeks to disguise even the fact of its own existence (Abraham & Torok 1994: 159). The source of the crypt might not even be a trauma experienced directly by the subject. Traumatic experience that is not properly buried can be inherited and ‘travel’ as a ‘transgenerational phantom’: ‘what haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others’ (Abraham & Torok 1994:171). Nicholas Rand has speculated that the haunttings of ancestral spectres might not only be a family affair, but could involve ‘the phantomatic return of shameful secrets on the level of... the community, and possibly even entire nations’ (Abraham & Torok 1994: 169).

When Kiowa is claimed by the shit field, Azar responds ironically: ‘Like those old cowboy movies. One more redskin bites the dirt’ (165). But is it only one? Kiowa is the name of a tribe and Vietnam was known colloquially as ‘Indian Country’. In Dispatches, Michael Herr complains that American soldiers had ‘all seen too many movies, stayed too long in Television city’ (Herr 1978: 201). However, the conceit which framed the Vietcong as Red (commie) Indians was not merely a postmodern simulacrum. The military tactics adopted in Indochina to win what Richard Slotkin called the ‘last great Indian War’ mirrored the genocidal strategies adopted against
native Americans: targeting civilian settlements, environmental devastation and
gestural relocation (Slotkin 2000: 562). The Military Assistance Programme which
justified excursions in South-East Asia was legitimated by ‘politically acceptable
precedents such as the US Army’s role in developing the American West’ (cited in
Chomsky 1970: 120). Intervention in Indochina was accompanied by distant echoes of
frontier mythology as well as Freikorps’ iconography: the ‘Red Wave’ threatening to
flood the Fatherland that Theweleit finds repeatedly in inter-war German literature
resonates with US Cold War demonology and domino theory.

According to Derrida, there is always ‘a crypt within a crypt, a name within a
name, a body within the body’ (Derrida 1986: xxvii). Are there other bodies buried
alongside and even inside Kiowa’s corpse? Is O’Brien’s shit field a mass grave? Alpha
Company spend hours trawling the shit field to find Kiowa’s body. Alternatively,
Abraham and Torok’s investigative method – the textual excavations of cryptonomy –
seeks not ‘a metonymy of things but a metonymy of words’ (Abraham & Torok 1986:
19). When Kiowa disappears into the earth, Bowker can still see a body part
protruding: ‘There was a knee’ (148). The conjunction here of ‘wounded’ Indian and
‘knee’ might be read as a ‘crypt-effect’ in which the last major armed conflict
between native Americans and the US army surfaces. The Wounded Knee massacre
(1890) was linked to the rise of the Ghost Dance. This intertribal visionary movement
responded to westward expansion with an apocalyptic vision of the land being
reborn. In the spring, the earth would be covered with a new soil that would bury all
white men whilst the Ghost Dancers were taken up into the air. When they returned
to a regenerated earth, all evil would be washed away and the ghosts of their
ancestors would join them. There are ghosts of the Ghost Dance in O’Brien’s shit field
and elsewhere in The Things They Carried. In ‘Style’, for example, when a teenage
Vietnamese girl with ‘black hair and brown skin’ (135) dances in a ‘weird ritual’ after
the traumatic loss of her family and ancestral village. The Ghost Dance movement
was integral to Kiowa culture from 1894 to 1916 and involved a syncretic blend of
tribal folklore, peyotism (a native American religion and sacramental ritual involving
the hallucinogenic peyote button) and Christian resurrection. In this context it is
noteworthy that O’Brien’s Kiowa is a devout Christian whose commanding officer –
Jimmy Cross - carries the Saviour’s initials, as well as the instrument of His death and subsequent resurrection.

According to the Ghost Dance vision, Christ’s second coming would be accompanied by the return of the bison. The Buffalo was a sacred creature ranked just below the Eagle and the Sun in Kiowa mythology. The Buffalo doctors were the Kiowa’s most revered medicine men and renowned for their ability to treat wounds inflicted in combat. In May 1971, at the Dellums Committee Hearings on War Crimes in Vietnam, Capt. Robert Johnson replied as follows to the question: ‘what did ‘Indian Country’ refer to?’ ‘I guess it means different things to different people. It’s like there are savages out there, there are gooks out there. In the same way we slaughtered the Indian’s buffalo, we would slaughter the water buffalo in Vietnam’ (Johnson: 1971). In ‘How to Tell a True War Story’, Rat Kiley methodically murders a water buffalo. Starting with the ‘right front knee’ he then shoots the animal in the ear, hindquarters, hump, flanks, mouth, tail, ribs, belly, nose and throat, but, remarkably, it survives. Throughout this assault the buffalo makes no sound and hardly moves aside from its rolling eyes which are ‘shiny black and dumb’ (O’Brien 1991: 76). The conjunction here of ‘buffalo’ and ‘soldier’ conjures a second transgenerational phantom. ‘Buffalo soldiers’, a nickname given to African Americans in the US army, was coined by the Kiowa tribe when they encountered the 10th Cavalry Regiment in western Kansas in the late 1860s. The name is said to be inspired partly by a resemblance between African American hair and the bison’s mane, but also by shared characteristics of strength, endurance and great patience. There are no African American soldiers in The Things They Carried, but Rat Kiley’s assault on the water buffalo threatens to open crypts in which the historical traumas of white violence and black suffering are buried. Kiley’s sadistic and systematic violence is a response to the loss of his friend, Curt Lemon, who stepped on a booby trap and was blown to pieces. The destruction of the buffalo mirrors Lemon’s fragmentation into parts left ‘hanging’ in a tree (78). The instant before the explosion, Lemon’s face appears ‘suddenly brown and shining’ (69 and repeated later on 79) as he steps into a dazzling sunlight that seems to ‘[come] around him and [lift] him up and [suck] him high into a tree’ (69). The image of a ‘kid’ with a brown face claimed by the ‘fatal whiteness of that light’ and left hanging from a tree might be read as a phantomatic passing that sign-posts a long
history of execution and lynching (79, my italics). Alternatively, the images of a young warrior ascending in light might take us back to the Kiowa and their most sacred ritual: the Sun Dance was situated by a sacred tree and involved the ceremonial slaughter of a buffalo with one shot, or arrow, since a bloody kill was considered an ill omen.

Curt Lemon’s messy dismemberment takes place on a ‘trail junction’ that intersects with the anagram buried in Rat Kiley’s name (trail key) (69). Following his attack on the buffalo, Kiley breaks down in tears as though in cryptic confirmation of Herr’s assertion that ‘Vietnam was where the Trail of Tears was headed all along’ (Herr 1978: 94). Kiley tries ‘to say something, but then cradled his rifle and went off by himself’ (76). Abraham and Torok speculate that ‘those who carry a tomb within themselves... carry one – or many secrets’ (158, 172). Typically, O’Brien’s characters are walking mausoleums of inexpressible mourning: ‘they all carried ghosts’ (9). Alongside the ghost of the pre-Oedipal mother, the topography of trauma in The Things They Carried is haunted by the spectre of racial guilt (the white man’s other burden). A cryptic trail of words, buried alive, takes us metonymically from the combat zones of Vietnam to Wounded Knee, the Trail of Tears, Buffalo trails and Colonel Charles Lynch’s infamous walnut tree. Cryptonomic crossings between Asian, native American and African American experience are buried in the gothic melting pot of a shit field. The topography of trauma is fractured by secrets: the crypt that cracks open to reveal other crypts. Where does this cascading end?

**Fiduciary markings in a shit field**

They would often discard things along the route of march. Purely for comfort they would throw away rations... no matter because by nightfall the resupply choppers would arrive with more of the same, then a day or two later still more, fresh watermelons and ammunition and sunglasses and woolen sweaters – the resources were stunning – sparklers for the Fourth of July, coloured eggs for Easter – it was the great American war chest... they carried like freight trains; they carried it on their backs and shoulders – and for all the ambiguities of Vietnam, all the mysteries and unknowns, there was at least the single abiding certainty that they would never be at a loss for things to carry.

(O’Brien 1991: 13-14)
One never escapes the *economy of war.*

(Derrida 1978: 148)

Just prior to his assault, Rat Kiley opens up ‘a can of C rations, pork and beans’ and offers some to the buffalo (75). When it refuses, Kiley begins the precise and mechanistic disassembly of the creature: knee, ear, hump, mouth, tail, nose. This procedure recalls a scene in ‘On the Rainy River’, where ‘O’Brien’ details working in a factory before he was drafted:

> In a lecture delivered a few years after World War Two, Heidegger asserted that, in the twentieth century, agriculture had become ‘a motorized food industry, the same thing in its essence as the production of corpses in the gas chambers and the extermination camps’ (cited in Farias 1989: 287). In the late nineteenth century, the extermination of around 30 million North American bison had more to do with industry than agriculture. Although, like Mary Anne in ‘Nam, the hunters might remove tongues as trophies or delicacies, buffalo were not killed for their meat. Skins were flayed for clothing, rugs and industrial machine belts, but the motive force behind the slaughter was the development and efficiency of transport infrastructure. The railroad companies financed the culling of buffalo because the huge herds delayed and sometimes damaged trains. At the same time, by cutting off food supply, this slaughter was a *de facto* contribution to the genocide of the Plains Indians.

According to industrial folklore, Henry Ford received inspiration for the assembly line manufacture of automobiles whilst in a Chicago slaughterhouse watching a conveyor belt carrying animal carcasses. Following the inaugural opening of the moving assembly line in Dearborn and Buffalo in 1913, the droves of North American bison were replaced by over fifteen million black Model Ts. Whether the Chicago slaughterhouse story is apocryphal or not, the design of Ford’s assembly lines augmented the ‘armoury system’ used by the US War Department in the
nineteenth century at Harper’s Ferry and Springfield. Subsequently, the Model T was adapted and used as a patrol car by the British who purchased around 20,000 vehicles in the first fully industrialised war. The mobilisation of industrial capacity for military production in World War One witnessed a fundamental transformation in weaponry, tactics and logistics. The war was won and lost in the factories manufacturing mechanical, metallurgical and chemical components for long-range artillery and machine-guns (like the revolving Hotchkiss canon used at Wounded Knee), aircraft, tanks and submarines. World War One escalated integration between industry and the military thus diminishing the distance between factory floor and battlefield. Movements in the factory were choreographed with martial discipline whilst soldier’s bodies, like those tied to assembly lines, were increasingly fused with heavy machinery. The mechanisation and dismantling of soldiers’ bodies in Europe was mirrored, in America, by Fordist labour and fantasy. In My Life and Work (1923), Ford calculated that the manufacture of a Model T required 7,882 distinct operations but only 949 of these required ‘able-bodied’ workers: ‘670 could be filled by legless men, 2,637 by one-legged men, two by armless men, 715 by one-armed and ten by blind men’ (cited in Seltzer 1998: 69).

Prominently displayed amongst the body parts in Mary Anne’s lair is a poster advertising an offer to ‘ASSEMBLE YOUR OWN GOOK!!’ (102). The most gruesome dismemberment in Things takes place when Curt Lemon steps on a booby trap. Coincidentally, Cora Lemon sold the Wayside Inn, in Sudbury, to Henry Ford in 1923 and he used the grounds as the site for a Mary-Martha Chapel (named for his mother and mother-in-law, but these biblical sisters also share names with the two adult female characters in O’Brien’s novel). Ford went on to build a series of six Mary-Martha chapels in an extension of the principle of seriality he cherished in his factory-temples. Assembly line manufacture is driven by a deathly repetition compulsion that converts human into machine and thus ‘restore(s) the inanimate state’ (Freud 2003a: 83). Like Freud’s trauma patients, Ford ‘implacably insist[ed] that every repetition be exactly the same’ (76). The roots of modern trauma theory lie of course in Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920). In Freud’s Great War novella the topography of Europe’s battlefields is mapped onto internecine psychic warfare. Classical psychoanalysis was radically revised during and immediately after World War One in a period when
Freud realised that even non-combatants had become ‘a tiny cog within the vast war machine’ (Freud 2005: 169). Near the beginning of Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Freud notes that the ‘terrible war that has only just ended gave rise to a great many such disorders [traumatic neuroses]’ (Freud 2003a: 50). The incessant repetitions displayed by war veterans disrupted classical psychoanalysis by hinting at the existence of previously unmapped and possibly unmappable psychic spaces. Freud’s exploration of these spaces in pursuit of the death drive was haunted by military metaphor. Throughout Beyond the Pleasure Principle the reader encounters tropes of ‘wounding’ and ‘strikes’, ‘combat’ and ‘mobilization’, ‘constant bombardment’ (65) and the ‘barrage of stimuli’ (68). Freud maps psychic topography as trench warfare in which ‘one group of drives goes storming ahead… another goes rushing back’ (81). In this internecine warfare there are ‘sentinels… standing guard’ (64) along with ‘protective shields’, ‘barriers’ and ‘screens’ (64, 74), but ultimately the defences are ‘breached’ by the ‘myrmidons of death’ (79).

The final lines of Beyond – ‘it was never a sin to limp’ (192) – allude both to scripture and the plight of those wounded veterans returning from the war. In ‘Speaking of Courage’, ‘Nam veteran Norman Bowker replays his traumatic memory of Kiowa’s loss in a shit field whilst cruising round the lake that borders his hometown. Bowker remembers Vietnam as a ‘shithole’ in which he acquired scatological expertise: ‘He knew shit. It was his specialty. The smell, in particular, but also the varieties of texture and taste’ (144). Excrement was a subject in which soldiers in Vietnam were given ample opportunities to acquire expertise: from sanitation in the field to the construction and maintenance of slit trench latrines and outhouses in camps and LZs (landing zones), from burning scybala to detecting Vietcong booby traps that were often coated in feces to increase the probability of infected wounds. Bowker tries to counter coprophagy in two ways: he opens his lips ‘very slightly’ whilst swimming in his hometown lake and he stops for a ‘Mama Burger’ at a drive-in A&W (152). Whilst ordering this fast-food product of the motorized food industry, Bowker experiences an auditory hallucination in which an intercom voice dubs scripted service sector dialogue with military jargon: ‘Repeat: one Mama, one fries, one small beer. Fire for effect. Stand by’ (150). In the ‘Notes’ that follow ‘Speaking of Courage’, O’Brien informs us that Bowker committed suicide
– an act which literalizes the death drive latent in the vet’s compulsive circling of his hometown lake. Bowker’s suicide note offers the following: ‘It’s almost like I got killed over in ‘Nam... That night when Kiowa got wasted, I sort of sank into the sewage with him... Feels like I’m still in deep shit’ (155). Given the extravagantly self-conscious Freudianism displayed elsewhere in Things it seems permissible to read the shit field as not only a crypt, but a safe full of dirty money. For Freud, as modernist anti-Midas, all money was filthy lucre. Psychoanalysis invokes a range of case histories alongside literary, mythological and anthropological examples, to confirm the folkloric equation between money and faeces. The shit field is the dead centre to O’Brien’s topography of trauma because it is what the US war machine was mobilised to protect. The financial costs of the Vietnam war were worth incurring to ensure long-term access to overseas market in South-East Asia. South Vietnam was flooded by American soldiers, carried by and carrying machines as well as an array of goods and mass culture. The PX’s were overflowing, the barracks and hooches boasted refrigerators, sound systems and TVs whilst the air waves carried rock’n’roll and US pop culture. The title story of O’Brien’s novel compiles an exhaustive inventory of the things carried by US soldiers and manufactured by US industry: the steel helmets, boots, flak jackets, ponchos, M-60s, M-16s, M-79s, ammunition, bombs, mines, binoculars, radios, canned food. Dominique Laporte suggests that ‘the site of power must distance itself from the site of shit’ (Laporte 2000: 42). Conversely, The Things They Carried constructs a cloaca maxima, or symbolic sewer, that carries dirty money from a rural shit field in South-East Asia to America’s industrial heartlands and back again.

Alpha Company carry the burden of overproduction in a bloated and militarized permanent war economy. One of the architects and originator of the term ‘permanent war economy’, Charles E. Wilson, Eisenhower’s Secretary of Defence, used his tenure to maximize synergy between military, industry and government. Wilson was convinced that the Second World War had pulled the US economy out of the Great Depression and that ‘preparedness’ was the key to maintaining national security, industrial growth and economic vitality. Before he took over at the Pentagon, Wilson was president of General Motors and earned the Medal of Merit for directing GM’s massive contribution to the war effort. In ‘Speaking of Courage’, Bowker drives his ‘father’s big Chevy’, a model first assembled by GM in 1923 at the
East Develan plant in Buffalo which Wilson converted to defence production in the Second World War. Although Bowker, unlike Kiowa, survives Vietnam, he is followed back to America by the ‘terrible killing power of that shit field... The filth seemed to erase identities, transforming the men into identical copies of a single soldier... interchangeable units’ (158, 164). Bowker carries his trauma whilst being carried by a component part in the permanent war economy that produces the preconditions for wide scale traumatic experience.

Impossible geographies

*If dead ground could come back and haunt you the way dead people do...*

(Herr 1978: 11)

In ‘To Speculate – On Freud’, Derrida poses the critical question confronting any topography of trauma: ‘Where are we?’ (Derrida 1987: 290). This question haunts the final page of *The Things They Carried*. At a frozen pond in Minnesota (the Dakota Indian term for ‘cloudy water’) the dead are miraculously resurrected: ‘I can see Kiowa, too, and Ted Lavender and Curt Lemon, and sometimes I can even see Timmy skating with Linda under the yellow floodlights. I’m young and happy. I’ll never die (O’Brien 1991: 236). The regression, or retreat here is threatened by traumatic eruptions. Just beneath the surface of the aseptic and deodorizing ice a field of shit is still boiling: ‘the shells made deep slushy craters, opening up all those years of waste, centuries worth, and the smell came bubbling out of the earth’ (147). The topography of trauma is recursive and shows no respect for borders. The shit field cannot be skated on or over since it cracks open into a fecalized crypt of birth trauma, gender crisis and racial guilt, industrialized battlefields and militarized factories. But does this answer Derrida’s question? And how sure can one’s footing be in a shit field? Perhaps my own scatter-bombing, or even muck-spreading, has ignored the possibility that sometimes a shit field is just a shit field? By dumping so much on this site, do we risk flushing away the phenomenological materiality, the *shittness* and fundamental *thingness* of things? If we sketch map a place as the site of multiple traumas, a *mise en abyme* of crypts within crypts, do we reduce it, perversely, to a utopia - (etymologically, a *non*-place)? Perhaps the critic at this point must also partially
retreat. Cathy Caruth has argued that the traumatized ‘carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot possess’ (Caruth 1995: 5). Following Caruth, we might propose that *The Things They Carried* itself carries but cannot possess the impossible place of trauma.

They carried the land itself – Vietnam, the place, the soil – a powdery orange-red dust that covered their boots and fatigues and faces. They carried the sky. The whole atmosphere, they carried it, the humidity, the monsoons, the stink of fungus and decay, all of it, they carried gravity (O’Brien 1991: 13).

**Bibliography**


offered at the Dellums Committee Hearings on War Crimes in Vietnam, April-May 1971
(recorded at http://members.aol.com/warlibrary/vwch1e.htm, accessed on 05.01.07).
Columbia University Press.
1800, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.