GHOSTS IN THE GLOOM: ENCOUNTERING THE SPECTER OF MEMORY IN HEINEMANN, O'BRIEN, AND NINH

A Thesis

by

MATTHEW JAMES BIZZELL

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Chair of Committee,	Larry J. Reynolds
Committee Members,	Robert Griffin
	Daniel Conway
Head of Department,	Maura Ives

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ABSTRACT

The danger of buried trauma in the subconscious is that it often surfaces to haunt the individual. Disturbing memory that has been excluded from that of the collective (the cultural consciousness) acts as a ghost. In literature of the Vietnam War, the ghost represents that problematic of traumatic memory and its degenerative effects on the subject. The purpose of this thesis is to interrogate a select number of fictive texts that treat the Vietnam War. A dedicated effort to illuminate key thematic features that distinguish these texts promises to enhance understanding of contemporary war literature (as seen from authors such as Klay and Gallagher) and aid in the growth of war-time veterans beyond the grasp of the traumatic memory. In the assessment of each text, several key themes are explored: the dissolution of the traumatic memory within the subject as something akin to the ghost; the role of the ghost as both a power for narrative development and a means of healing through its banishment; and finally, the threat that the ghost may lead to the *infinite* possibility that traps the storyteller in a cycle of repression and lies. This work seeks not only to demonstrate the significance of the literary ghost but also to show its potential application to literal recovery from psychological trauma brought on by war-time experience.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to everyone in my family that offered their service so that the rest of us may endeavor to pursue our passions. Dad, Grandpa, Papa, Uncles Bill, Allen, and Ted; and to Wade Moore, my best friend that decided to answer the same call. Without them, I would never have learned to see the person behind the uniform.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

"The vengeful spirits always rise up, and always return, and always exact retribution."

Charles Horner, "The Ghosts of Vietnam"

"I would wish this book could take the form of a plea for everlasting peace, a plea from one who knows, from one who's been there and come back, an old soldier looking back at a dying war."

Tim O'Brien, *If I Die in a Combat Zone*

"Remembering is a branch of witchcraft; its tool is incantation. I often say, as if it were a joke—but it's true—that instead of God I believe in ghosts. To conjure up the dead you have to dangle the bait of the present before them, the flesh of the living, to coax them out of their inertia."

Ruth Klüger, *Still Alive*

The aberrations of our individual memory manifest themselves as ghosts; these aberrations, understood as the unabsorbed individual traumas that have been translated from the traumatic experience (an unconscious and uncontrolled process) into the "forsaken" memory, are analogous to ghosts—haunting from mystified or unknowable spaces that defy the "natural" processes of memory. This space can and should be

understood as a tangible gloom, an opaque mist that mystifies the consequences of not just war, but also the everyday traumas that both soldiers and civilians contend with. In literature, and specifically that of the Vietnam War for our purposes, the ghost represents the negated past where trauma and violent confrontation have penetrated (and permeated) consciousness. Through an investigation of the works of Tim O'Brien and his contemporaries, such as Bao Ninh and Larry Heinemann,[1] where ghosts symbolize the elision of memory—the collective forgetfulness that crafts history—we can begin to ground the literary ghost in the fiction produced amidst the horrors of the Vietnam War. As Clara Juncker suggests, ghosts form in a narrative void (115), a space in which the individual's story is banished to silence and precluded from that of the collective. This monstrous birth is a Gothic notion,[2] but its truth permeates modernity and is carried forward in novels like Tim O'Brien's *In the Lake of the Woods* where ghosts coalesce in

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[1] There are a great many other novels that I am excluding from this discussion due to space, but their importance should not be overlooked. *Novel Without a Name* and *In the Fields of Fire* are two such examples, but there are many others that will need to be dealt with, elsewhere in order to firmly grasp the extent of that which I am forwarding.

[2] Here, I would be remiss if I did not at least mention Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* as critical to the development (we can argue, genesis) of this notion. However, it must be noted that the ghosts to which I refer throughout the paper are not *genealogical* ghosts, haunters of patriarchy, as with some of the gothic ghosts. This argument is made by Brian Jarvis in "Skating on a Shit Field: Tim O'Brien and the Topography of Trauma." Jarvis positions gothic authors like Hawthorne as creating (or at least elucidating) the "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" (139). Vietnam understood as a gothic landscape, "Vietnam the Vampyress" (135), creates a space in which the ghost can be *inherited*: "Traumatic experience that is not properly buried can be inherited and 'travel' as a 'transgenerational phantom'" (139), but also as a location in which to problematize cultural identities: "the gothic provides a way of writing *past* trauma that destabilizes the self-protective fictions that undergird traumatizing ideologies of communal belonging" (Hinrichsen 221). Patricia Yaeger forwards a similar concept only applied to William Faulkner and the American South: "Place is never simply 'place' in Southern writing, but always a site where trauma has been absorbed into the landscape" (Hinrichsen 225). This is precisely *not* the type of haunting that we are talking about in the space of this paper, the ghost of "guilt hidden or denied [that] festers in the soul of sinner" (McCay 120), but the notion of geography permeated by specters warrants further attention, elsewhere.

the gloom where the trauma of past experience conflicts with the daily operation of the present and the surrounding cultural memory—splinters of individual experience that confront the collective. For Glenn Dayley in "Familiar Ghosts, New Voices: Tim O'Brien's *July, July*," Vietnam is the "closet out of which many of O'Brien's reoccurring ghosts float" (317) and most—if not all—of O'Brien's novels reflect this motif. This is not unlike Heinemann's *Paco's Story*, where ghosts not only signify the fragments of war, but veil the protagonist in a wreath of the suppressed past. Paco's inability to progress past his silence is due to the weight of ghosts that cling to him. It bears mentioning that Heinemann envisioned his novel as something of a ghost story: "As you read Paco's Story, you will notice that it is, for want of a better word, a ghost story. In fact, the sub-genre of 'ghost story' seems a large part of the tight war-story form that emerged from the war" (Heinemann *Paco's* xii).

The ghost is the result of a history haunted by trauma, a reoccurrence of the past within the present. Making memory heterogeneous—allowing the truth of the individual to join with the pervasive collective, to be accounted for (never fully, heterogeneity itself implies an unevenness) without neutering it through mere assimilation—is an act of banishment or reconciliation. It is not simply an acknowledgement of the past that grants reprieve, but the articulation of a contested memory that occupies conflicting spheres of the individual and collective. There is an ambivalence associated in this conflict, rooted in the idea of heterogeneity and an uneven topography of memory; admitting individual stories (traumatic ones, specifically) into the collective allows a voice for the muted, but it also dissolves the ownership of that story somewhat.

In order to quell the ghost, memory must be translated into truth beyond reality—"[a]bsolute occurrence is irrelevant" (O'Brien *Things* 80)—into a story that has the ability to push against the walls of repression that exist both internally and externally to the individual. Though optimistic, such an endeavor is never completely liberating, never a total rebirth. The scars of memory are both literal and metaphoric and they do not disappear—we can only hope to recuperate from them, to move *toward* the present and its possibility. Such an endeavor may mean the pacification of our ghosts born of the past rather than the obliteration of them, but this notion may be a productive one as well.

Here, it would be appropriate to interject Freud and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* into the idea of the ghost as traumatic apparition. We will continue to return to Freud throughout the remainder of the thesis as a theoretical foundation to my argument, but it would behoove us to speak of him now. The "traumatic neurosis" (Freud 10) that is introduced early on precedes the insinuation of fear (*Furcht*) or anxiety (*Angst*); it is the shock or fright (*Shreck*) of danger—danger suddenly thrust upon the individual—that gives birth to psychological trauma (11). We may augment Freud slightly here: In the case of the soldier, the fright that leads to trauma is not altogether unanticipated, it is beyond the soldier's expectation of the event. In other words, war does not cause the soldier fright in the broad sense; it is entirely possible for one to experience both fear and anxiety about the aims and operations of war. However, the expectation of conflict *always* pales in comparison to the event, itself. One will never know the hot weight of a bullet as it enters the body, nor the grisly scene of corpses, until one is within the moment. Indeed, war may uncover aspects of character well-hidden or thought not to

exist simply by its situational remove.[3] In any event, it becomes clear the expectation itself is important and it is something that we will return to.

We must also acknowledge Freud's use of dream as an aspect of traumatic neuroses that have the "characteristic of repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident, a situation from which he wakes up in another fright" (11). The eternal return that Freud speaks to acts as a site of retraumatization, a repetition of the event without mastery and a departure from the *fort-da* game that he explicates later in the chapter. The outlook is bleak, but there may be an alternative: "I am not aware, however, that patients suffering from traumatic neurosis are much occupied in their waking lives with memories of their accident. Perhaps they are more concerned with *not* thinking of it" (12). The world of dreams is indeed the site of trauma, occurring again and again, but the introduction of the dream-space may ease the burden. As opposed to actual dream, the dream-space is a place of working-through, of mastery of the event through active means. This dream-space is simply the matrix of writing, a place where experience can be divorced from the self and where dreams can be made malleable. Through the recrafting of the event outside of its factual occurrence, reconciliation of memory is possible. One may work through the trauma of the event by proxy. However, reconciliation is not redemption nor resurrection, it is always limited. The rearticulation of a story, the artifice associated with truth *beyond* reality, is never total or complete.

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[3] For more on Situationism, see John Doris' *Lack of Character: Personality and Moral Behavior*. The book thoroughly introduces the school of thought and critiques the idea of stable virtues in favor of myriad situations with divergent impressions and responses.

Reconciliation, then, is akin to the scar that marks the passing of a wound, an artifact caused by damage, healed, but by no means seamless.

> The stream moans, a desperate complaint mixing with distant faint jungle sounds, like an echo from another world. The eerie sounds come from somewhere in a remote past, arriving softly like featherweight leaves falling on the grass of times long, long ago. (Ninh 4)

The passage, a hauntingly beautiful heralding of the emergence of ghosts onto the landscape of Vietnam appears early in the text of Bao Ninh's *Sorrow of War*. Ninh mixes the natural with the supernatural, the material and the ethereal, to evoke the image of the ghost. The past imposes itself upon the present and brings its aberrations with it. These monsters, these orphans of memory are created through trauma (violent or otherwise), through the "unfolding of traumatic memory" and the "*literal* return of the event against the will of the one it inhabits" (Melley 108). This metaphorical possession dredges up those experiences that have penetrated beyond the ego and have taken up residence in the unconscious self. The damage of these memories—the specters of the Eternal Present—is crippling. The subjects of such psychological carnage are literally (and in the cases we will pursue, *literarily*) haunted by experience: "the figure of the ghost…allegorizes history" (Hantke 71), it associates traumatic memory with haunting. However, it is important to recognize Melley's use of Freud in his explication of trauma. As we have noted, the forever returning nature of trauma was motivated by dreams and

not the realm of the conscious.[4] I posit that dreams work within the fiction of the Vietnam War as reoccurring experience and provides the reader a lens by which to view the trauma of characters while dream-space provides an avenue of alleviation. Through the "poetics of haunting…a richly metaphoric repertoire of conceptual tools which, if used with caution and sensitivity, can enable more precision about those interstices and intervals where remembering happens" (Kirss 23), the relationship between trauma and ghosts can be explicated *and* seen as possessing merit in our literary fields.

This haunting is not exclusive to Ninh In fact, the emergence of ghosts within Vietnam War literature is well-documented;[5] however, their relation to trauma has yet to be articulated fully. Articles like Hantke's note the *appearance* of the supernatural, but fail to illuminate its relationship with war literature as a whole. The scope of this thesis, then, is much narrower and will consider some of the more visible fictive texts of the period such as *The Things They Carried* and *The Sorrow of War* alongside some of the more overlooked novels, namely, the often-maligned *Paco's Story* and *In the Lake of the Woods*. *Paco's Story* won the National Book Award for fiction in 1987, a feat made perhaps more spectacular given that one of the other books in consideration was Toni

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[4] There remains the issue of why these past traumas endure time and cripple the individual so far removed from the event. How is it that the present traumas of war escape the notice of the soldier in the moment only to persist indefinitely after the fact? For this, we must rely on the *piercing* nature of trauma and its ability to effectively bypass consciousness. War is undoubtedly traumatic, but its effect is a delayed and lingering one. There are injuries, to be sure, but perhaps the more damaging losses occur only after the battlefield grows quiet. This being an exploration of fictive texts allows us to call on Freud for the answer. The immediate trauma of war plants itself deep in the subconscious, deferred to the dream-state and only accessible indirectly.

[5] Stephen H. Hantke in his article, *The Uses of the Fantastic and the Deferment of Closure in American Literature on the Vietnam War,* catalogues the appearance of both ghosts and the fantastic in Vietnam War literature.

Morrison's *Beloved* (another ghost story, actually). Despite its past success, remarkably little scholarship exists on Heinemann's award-winning novel. The neglect that surrounds the novel can be read in several ways, but I argue that it is Paco's failed encounter with his own ghosts, a relationship that leaves him in a state of perpetual deferment, that allows the novel to be overlooked in recent scholarship.[6]

> Do dreams offer lessons? Do nightmares have themes, do we awaken and analyze them and live our lives and advise others as a result? Can the foot soldier teach anything important about war, merely for having been there? I think not. He can tell war stories. (O'Brien *If I Die* 23)

War stories cannot be assimilated into our collective memory, not if we persist in our privileging of witnessing *as* recognition—we see the spectacular violence of war and satiate our desire for blood and carnival without weighing the value of such a representation. Authors, such as O'Brien, Heinemann, and Ninh, write to create true witnesses, those that understand witnessing as something beyond identifying an aesthetic, those that realize the value of truths beyond factual occurrence: "I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth" (O'Brien *Things* 166) where "adding and subtracting, making up a few things to get at the real truth" (82) becomes a process of growth and healing that defies a traditional understanding of

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[6] With the noted exception of Stacey Peebles and "The Ghosts That Won't Be Exorcised." Peebles will augment my argument to *Paco's Story* throughout the remainder of this thesis.

history that states: history is written by the victors, and the victors do not include the damaged.[7]

Amidst the explication of the ghost in Vietnam War literature as a product of misbegotten or abortive memory (in the sense that the normal function of memory has been, in many ways, abandoned; engagement with the memory has been omitted, elided due to trauma), the purpose of this thesis is also to reintegrate these novels I have mentioned that have faded from the gaze of academia. The importance of these texts in the wake of Iraq and Afghanistan War literature cannot be missed. Writers, such as Phil Klay and his short story collection *Redeployment*, and Matt Gallagher and his fostering of the multi-author collection *Fire and Forget,* have made these Vietnam texts more present than they have been in decades. With titles like "War Stories" where veterans engage in the telling of their wartime experience (a deliberate and clear reference by Klay to O'Brien's "How to Tell a True War Story") and chapters replete with once-familiar themes of memory, trauma, and even ghosts, O'Brien and his contemporaries are once again called up to the front to serve as the literary masters for the burgeoning generation of veteran writers. A crystallization of the problematic themes present in these Vietnam texts, including the issues of haunting and forsaken memory that I attempt to disentangle here, will serve as foundational to the influx of our contemporary war

[7] If space allowed, we would do well to discuss moral injury and its relation, or lack thereof, to post-traumatic stress. However, since we cannot, we must be content with merely mentioning the idea. Moral injury deals with the damage wrought by taking actions that oppose our own ethical and moral codes. There is something of the tragic hero in this where duty demands one thing while religion or morality demands another: "I was not simply a witness, but an integral, even dedicated, party to a very wrong thing" (Heinemann *Black* 37).

literature.[8] For Kirss, acknowledging the ghost allows us to resist the collective history that ignores the painfully-present trauma that is propagated by, and persists because of, our conflicts and wars: "Revisionary history writing and the institutionalization of commemoration evade or foreclose the ghostly, since these efforts often serve nationalist or identitarian projects." The legitimacy of the ghost is opposed by efforts to minimize the "traces of violence" in history that are purposely negated by hegemonic structures (22). O'Brien is engaged in a separate process of remembering, a process that "…makes it now…Stories are for eternity, when memory is erased, when there is nothing to remember except the story" (*Things* 41). As soldiers in Vietnam, "[t]hey all carried ghosts" (18), but for those ghosts of memory to be articulated and dealt with—banished as degenerative and implemented as fragments to be accepted into cultural memory—the return to the United States must be one that facilitates story. What O'Brien may be hinting at is a certain domestication of the ghost, a de-clawing that renders the ghost less dangerous, but no less potent to the project of reconciling memory.

The multifarious texts that emerged from the war in Vietnam are not to be defined categorically; they are to be interrogated in their nuance and remembered beyond typical tropes and imagery. In this sense, the metaphor of banishment extends to our respective fields—only through a critical acknowledgement of obscured texts can we

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[8] Some of the most poignant and profound texts of these recent wars have likely not been written yet (we must consider that O'Brien's *Things They Carried* was not published until 1990); there remains a great deal of work to be done that will not even make itself known until years from now. Getting a handle on what we have now is crucial to this forward-looking project of disentangling the effects of war and the story produced.

participate in the multiplicity of pasts as seen through the eyes of both American and Vietnamese soldiers and expand understanding.

> 'Haunted' texts do not pretend that people and cultures can be 'delivered' of ghosts 'merely' by telling stories about them…the 'ghostly haunt' in a text gives 'notification' of the unfinishable yet demanding quality of the past, and issues an imperative for close, persistent ethical attention (Kirss 27).

Kirss and Gordon point to a project of vigilance when dealing with ghosts, their persistence in history and potential unbanishability ("You can tell a true war story if you just keep on telling it" [O'Brien *Things* 82]). However, perhaps without intending to, they also suggest that the text itself is a ghost, one that remains a constant reminder of haunting. Novels like *The Sorrow of War* and *Paco's Story* reinforce this claim, existing as texts that are unbanishable ghosts in our collective memory, as cracks in the veneer of a national mythology that seeks to disqualify individual accounts of violence, fear, and terror that do not fit into serviceable political categories. Like ghosts, these texts demand our renewed attention and stand to extend understanding to generations removed from the blood and horror through their interminable existence. We continue to live with these ghosts, but we choose to ignore them in favor of more pleasing renditions of history. However, this recognition is not without its danger. The story of trauma, the very transmission of pain through writing can do violence on the reader as well as the writer. There is, in essence, a potential for *re*traumatization by the dissemination of these particular individual memories. We what are faced with is the double-edged nature of writing itself, replete with powers of healing and harm. The responsibility of the writer

to faithfully reproduce the emotional truth of the story cannot be understated. The individual that elects to commit the core of their individual memory to the annals of a national and collective memory must be prepared to risk the emergence of pain within themselves and the reader—a veritable transmission of violence through the written word—for the sake of conveying their truth. Without a doubt, there is value in this enterprise, in the reconciliation of the collective and the individual, but we cannot expect that the subject matter will not do violence in its form of expression.[9]

Understanding the ghost as part of a "range of complex phenomena through which suppressed, erased, unvoiced, and misappropriated aspects of the past reappear, or are explicitly and deliberately reconfigured" (Kirss 21) allows us to speak of trauma and its effects as critical to the development of the literary ghost, but "[f]or the personal testimony of victims and witnesses of violence to be believed requires the appropriate political and social circumstances for them to be heard" (Kirss 21). The ghost circumvents this restriction—disqualified testimony is reintroduced into collective memory through the presence of the ghost. The "appropriate circumstances" required for testimony still pushes the ghost to the fringe, but allows for a dissenting voice in the face of national mythologies, at least.

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[9] Felman and Laub point to this transmission of violence in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. A "re-externalization" of the event is only possible through transmission to an other, to one outside, this creating the conditions for violence to be continued.

CHAPTER II

GHOSTS IN THE GLOOM

> For the common soldier, at least, war has the feel—the spiritual texture—of a great ghostly fog, thick and permanent. There is no clarity. Everything swirls. The old rules are no longer binding, the old truths no longer true. Right spills over into wrong. Order blends into chaos, love into hate, ugliness into beauty, law into anarchy, civility into savagery. The vapors suck you in. You can't tell where you are, or why you're there, and the only certainty is overwhelming ambiguity. (O'Brien *Things* 79)

The creation of the ghost is rooted in the conscious incomprehension of trauma. In other words, the impossibility of fully understanding the experience leads to the ghost. The devastation wrought in the traumatic event is unintelligible and marred by the inability to communicate its presence: "The pictures get jumbled; you tend to miss a lot. And then afterward, when you go to tell about it, there is always that surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it *seemed*" (O'Brien *Things* 69). The two selections from O'Brien's most popular work point toward the gloom that I introduced earlier. Not only must one deal with the eternal return of the ghost itself, but one first must sift through the fog of memory and interrogate the gaps that exist. The precise danger of this gloom is that it bars many from ever explicating their trauma, and while this feature may not be exclusive to war, it certainly makes things much more difficult to those who suffer from violent trauma.

In many ways, the violent trauma of wartime experience *is* a ghost, it is the incommunicable pain that is locked away from the external world as well as what lies within. In *Paco's Story*, Heinemann's protagonist (Paco) is trapped within the walls of his own past, "trying to get out from under the Vietnam War experience" (Peebles 137)—he is left alone and mute with the ghosts of his dead company to serve as narrators:

> And we're pushing up daisies for half a handful of millennia (we're all pushing up daisies, James), until we're powder finer than talc, *finer* than fine, as smooth and hollow as an old salt lick—but that blood-curdling scream is rattling all over God's ever-loving Creation like a BB in a boxcar, only louder. (Heinemann *Paco's* 17)

We are meant to understand our collective narrator as that piercing scream, the unsophisticated and nearly unintelligible voice in the cacophony of war. Heinemann relies on ghosts to relate Paco's story because Paco can't and because just maybe that shrill, blood-curdling scream will be loud enough to be heard over the din of the collective.[10]

The metaphor of ghostly apparition is textually synonymous with the character's experience. The creation of ghosts in *Paco's Story* is both a proliferation of the supernatural and the metaphoric. Heinemann engages explicitly with the ghosts of

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[10] "I am again struck by the deep irony that I became a writer because of our war in Vietnam, not in spite of it" (Heinemann *Paco's* xi). Heinemann picked up his own ghosts in Vietnam, but unlike Paco, he is able to tell his story—he does not rely on the ghosts as his voice. This is something that we will return to, later.

memory by employing them, setting them to haunt, but he also uses them to make present the immobility of the protagonist. Paco, wreathed in the ghosts of his dead comrades, is incapable of any semblance of progress; he is crippled by the *re*occurrence of the past, and locked in a state of immobility that does not extend to Paco's physical movement. "The bad stuff never stops happening: it lives in its own dimension, replaying itself over and over" (O'Brien *Things* 37), a dream-state that encourages somnambulism, a state without purposeful direction. Paco's job at the Texas Lunch is nothing spectacular, and in fact, the drudgery of it is explicated to the highest degree. The question is why. Heinemann couches the horror of what he is about to unveil in the mundane day-to-day operation of Paco both to instill the stoic silence that Paco is confined to and provide a sharp contrast for what is to come. At the end of the dish washing scene, we get a glimpse back into the trauma that has set Paco adrift: "And, James, cleaning that 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" (Heinemann *Paco's* 116). The pungency of the event returns to Paco in a moment that is almost pastoral in its initial construction.

Later in the sequence, at night, Paco's ghosts return to haunt him: "No, James, Paco has never asked, *Why me?* It is we—the ghosts, the dead—who ask, Why him? So Paco is made to dream and remember…It is at those moments that he is least wary, most receptive and dreamy. We hover around him like an aura, and declare" (137). The ghosts whisper a "dream or a reverie" (138) into the sleeping Paco and demand that he remember, all the agency drained from him by the unwilling memory. Ghosts, then, are

both the suppression of the past and its desire to be articulated; the aporia present within the concept points to the difficulty of such an endeavor—how do we express a compressed past that avoids easy articulation? O'Brien forwards something of an answer in *The Things They Carried*, succor may be found by an act of remembrance: "so by this act of remembrance, by putting the facts down on paper, I'm hoping to relieve at least some of the pressure on my dreams" (O'Brien *Things* 42). Here, the traumatic manifests in the world of dreams that Freud has introduced us to, and while we may not be able to depend on Freud's theories in our own dreams, his guidance in these fictive texts proves useful.

The individual, handicapped by experience, persists in O'Brien's *In the Lake of the Woods*. John Wade—a soldier turned magician-politician—is suffocated by his own horrific past, but that past has been actively sublimated, deferred indefinitely through an act of forgetting: "You go about your business. You carry the burdens, entomb yourself in silence, conceal demon-history from all others and most times from yourself" (*Lake* 461). Wade recognizes the power of forgetting, the "willful abandonment of the past" (Ramadanovic 1) that lies on a razor's edge, a "balance between knowing and not knowing, between remembering and forgetting the past" (Ramadanovic 3)—but abuses it out of a disjointed pain with stark reality: Vietnam was a "place where the air itself was both reality and illusion, where anything might instantly become anything else" (O'Brien *Lake* 300). Wade rejects the reality of his circumstances, of the weight of Vietnam, and opts for illusion: "Some things he would remember clearly. Other things he would remember only as shadows, or not at all. It was a matter of adhesion. What

stuck and what didn't" (246). Wade "tricked himself into believing it hadn't happened the way it had happened" (295), "he gave himself over to forgetfulness" (336). His own ghosts, while still birthed in the traumatic moment, are left to putrefaction; willed ignorance is an answer that only perpetuates the haunting experience that lies beneath the surface: "This could not have happened. Therefore it did not" (336). The stagnation leads to infection with the culmination of the novel a sterilization of those associated with Wade's forgetting-deception. O'Brien's character is involved in a selective story-telling, a process that similarly embraces possibility, but to a degree that it ceases to be beneficial. In this way: "[i]magination was a killer" (*Things* 19) and John Wade is free to dig graves out of his ghosts and lies.

Ninh's setting for *The Sorrow of War* invokes the intermingling of the ghost and nature, humanity and the omnipresent death that hangs so pungently over the head of the soldier:

> After the Americans withdrew, the rainy season came, flooding the jungle floor, turning the battlefield into a marsh whose surface water turned rust-colored from the blood. Bloated human corpses, floating alongside the bodies of incinerated jungle animals, mixed with branches and trunks cut down by artillery, all drifting in a stinking marsh. (Ninh 5)

At the intersection of war and nature, there is death. It can be hard to tell where the battlefield ends and the landscape begins—they are inextricably intertwined: "Kien was told that passing this area at night one could hear birds crying like human beings" (6). Ninh makes this connection explicit later in the novel: "We must keep our best seeds,

otherwise all will be destroyed. After a lost harvest, even when starving, the best seeds must be kept for the next crop…[he] felt certain he would never join them, or become a seed for successive war harvests" (18). The metaphor of soldiers as the seeds of war continues to blend the border between war and nature, the natural death brought on by the course of things and a death wrought by metal, grease, and fire. Like so many that came before him, Kien fears the reaping. The mystical presence of nature continues to play throughout Ninh's novel, cropping up in the form of the *canina* flower:

> The local people say *canina* thrives in graveyards or any area carrying the scent of death. A blood-loving flower. It smells so sweet that this is hard for us to believe…The tasty *canina* had many wondrous attributes. They could decide what they'd like to dream about, or even blend the dreams, like preparing a wonderful cocktail. With *canina* one smoked to forget the daily hell of the soldier's life, smoked to forget hunger and suffering. Also, to forget death. And totally, but not totally, to forget tomorrow. (Ninh 12)

The *canina* too is at the intersection of nature and war, a "blood-loving flower" like the poppy, that grows in the wake of death and suffering. Soldiers eating and smoking *canina* make a ready comparison to the lotus-eaters in the *Odyssey*, both partaking of that which lends itself to forgetfulness. The properties of *canina*[11] allows for both

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[11] '*Canina'* means literally 'dog', the dog flower is apparently common in both Europe and Asia, but it is used mainly for teas. Ninh's use of the flower as a hallucinogenic is perhaps a stretch of the flower's properties, but it would be interesting to ask why this particular flower is used rather than other non-medicinal drugs. Perhaps Ninh is comparing the soldier to a dog, the dogs of war, consuming the flower and forgetting. However, in WWII, *canina* were used in victory gardens within the United States, and the flower has also been used as a soil stabilizer and land reclaimer. Does the presence of the flower in Vietnam point to both a reclaimed land and a victory of sorts?

possibility ("they could decide what they'd like to dream about, or even blend the dreams…") and negation ("to forget hunger and suffering. Also, to forget death."), the flower itself a space for story to thrive in the dream-space of the jungles of Vietnam or a place to bury the cruelties of a world haunted by war. Ninh's setting becomes important for its uncommon associations of the natural and the supernatural; ghosts may not rise from a haunted landscape, but their presence is entwined with war and nature and sets the stage for what is to come.

For Kien, the creation of the ghost is bound up in a memory outside and perhaps foreign to the ideological events that spurred the conflict: "[t]he sprits of all those killed in the war will remain with Kien beyond all political consequences of the war" (63); ghosts are divorced from consequence in the broad sense. Unlike the Gothic ghost, Ninh's ghosts are not shackled to bloodlines and the repression of guilt—they rise in the wake of the unknown, the battles on unmarked land that result in the death and disappearance of the innumerable, the non-quantifiable mists on the landscape of Vietnam. The traditional impetus of the ghost still holds, however: "numerous souls of ghosts and devils were born in that deadly defeat. They were still loose, wandering in every corner and bush in the jungle, drifting along the stream, refusing to depart for the Other World" (6). The ghost exists as the unaddressed experience, the traumatic result that refuses to be sublimated.

The deaths of enemies and friends alike are a part of the traumatic experience and, in a nuanced way, Ninh offers the ghost as both mechanism and effect of trauma. While I argue that the ghost is an integral part of the afterbirth of trauma, *The Sorrow of*

War also points to the ways in which ghosts are able to further incite the traumatic. Not only can the ghost be a product of experience, it can perpetrate that experience, infecting still others, as when Kien's father "releases" the ghosts from his paintings and allows them to roam (111).

Kien is willing to bury the memories of his own experience that threaten the reemergence of traumatic memories. He too is involved in a process of forgetting: "If you want to bury a memory then just don't mention it. Secondly, you'd better ensure that no one else talks about certain memories, either" (215). The words of the ill-fated Phuong implicate a collective or social forgetting, as well, a repression of select memories in order to create a cultural history—it is precisely the same project that gives birth to national histories and mythologies. This conscious effort to push down the return of the "eternal past" (88) reveals a will to be free of the traumatic, but it is not until Kien seeks to reveal, rather than bury, the memory that he will be free of his own ghosts: "The tragedies of the war years have bequeathed to my soul the spiritual strength that allows me to escape the infinite present. The little trust and will to live that remains stems not from my illusions but from the power of my recall (47)"

Kien's break from the immobility of the present, represented by his drunken stupor and almost-somnambulist actions (owed to the persistence of the past, the "war years"), is based on his ability to articulate the traumatic, an exploration into the gloom that bears fruit.

The creation of the ghosts through the sublimation of violent experience—be it through the piercing nature of trauma itself or an active process of repression or

forgetting—is typically metaphoric. With few exceptions, the emergence of ghosts is a collection of images standing in for the more horrific whole that is "forever marred by the haunting of the past that intrudes into the daily present" (Um 832). However, those affected by the experience are subject to degradation, a reality of suffering. The creation of ghosts then ceases to be rooted in metaphor and becomes something dire. The effects of trauma wither the individual and rob the subject of his or her basic humanity—the dregs of trauma, the afterbirth of the experience mires the affected:

> 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. (Ninh 70)

The "lonely spirits" that haunt Kien at night, that take up residence as mirrors within his mind, are his tormentors. Throughout the novel, Kien's most present enemies are not enemy combatants but the ghosts that rise from trauma. Just as John Wade employs mirrors to obscure (and possibly efface) the truth, the ghosts of Kien's mind work to entrap—the mirror prevents true perspective and encapsulates the subject in a fabrication, a distortion; Kien becomes wrapped in the story of his sorrow, of his own haunted soul, poisoned by the negating power of the ghost. Without the ability to explore the traumatic through a process of recrafting, the memory—a type of story in its own right—bars the potential for healing, for progress.

The reduction of the autonomous subject into something less than human is prolific throughout Vietnam War literature: “You come over clean and you get dirty and then afterwards it’s never the same” (O’Brien *Things* 108). Kien is seen as a “haunted soul” (Ninh 229) whose past collides with what remains of his identity: “[t]he ghosts of the war haunted them and permeated their deteriorating lives” (230). The spirit of traumatic memory penetrates the recesses of the mind and renders the subject mute: “The uprush of so many souls penetrated Kien’s mind, ate into his consciousness, becoming a dark shadow overhanging his own soul” (25). The haunting is so complete that Kien is eventually forced to question his own existence as flesh and blood: “Was he any of those ghosts, or of those remains dug up in the jungle?” (230). The post-war “life” of Kien is little more than a drunken stupor punctuated by frenzied madness that penetrates the barrier between life and death: “He seemed to have inside him a deep slash into which his life force was draining, pouring from him slowly, silently, yet irrevocably. His vital life force flowed from him as from a broken pot, and Kien fainted away” (117). Kien too is rendered immobile much in the same ways Paco is. Trauma is a very real wound and its ability to transform its victim into a ghost or a cadaver is a primordial and totalizing force that is present in each of the texts I have brought attention to. In this way, the ghost has the ability to propagate itself, or at the very least, bring about the conditions of its continued “existence.” When we allow ghosts to permeate the world of the normal as something debilitating, we are ceding ground to processes of cultural forgetting. A repurposing of the ghost, however, has the ability to reclaim.

John Wade's degenerating identity as Sorcerer represents this collapse under the weight of trauma. His eerie stalking of Kathy after the war is one way in which he assumes the role of the ghost through a ritualized haunting. Wade's burden also manifests in his somnambulism; "[l]ike a sleepwalker" (O'Brien *Lake* 282), he begins to fade into an oblivion—a void and blank space—created through psychological suffering: "I don't feel real sometimes. Like I'm not *here*" (301). O'Brien reinforces this in several places, first with the narrator of *The Things They Carried*: "In a way, maybe, I'd gone under with Kiowa, and now after two decades I'd mostly worked my way out" (173). The narrator skirted death and a simultaneously prolonged existence for twenty years. Later: "I came unattached from the natural world…I was invisible; I had no shape, no substance; I weighed less than nothing. I just drifted" (192). Even Rat Kiley, the platoon medic, succumbs to the weight of trauma and borders the self-as-ghost: "I can't keep seeing myself dead" (O'Brien *Things* 204). Ray Kiley opts out of the war because he sees nothing but bodies in the making, nothing but the deaths of all those that are still alive. He sees zombies or ghosts, dismembered, including himself.

This process of spiritual or psychological death is arguably the entire point of *Paco's Story*. Paco is relegated to the fringes, to the subaltern, without the ability to cope with his own brutal experiences of the war: he looks "like death warmed over. Like he was someone back from the dead" (Heinemann *Paco's* 207) and "Aunt Myrna says he has a way of stiffening up and staring right through you. As if he's a ghost. Or you're the ghost" (206).

In the aftermath of Paco's multifarious traumas, we see him skirt the line of the living and the departed: "Paco opened his eyes with a blink and whispered, 'Hey,' just to hear the sound of his own voice—the same as you might pinch yourself, James, to prove that you are substance, and awake and alive, after all" (52). Paco's return to the world of the living is just that, an affirmation that he is not one of the ghosts of Alpha Company that become the narrators of Paco's interminable silence. "And Mr. Elliot jerks his head up and looks at Paco silhouetted like an apparition against that strong, clean, late-afternoon light" (71). Again, Paco appears as a ghost, is mistaken for one by Mr. Elliot, the immigrant store-owner. For him, Paco fills the role of another boy lost in his youth during another forgotten war. Paco acts as a site of remembrance for the old man, a conduit to his own war and the memories that lay tangled up with it: "suddenly the old man is overcome by an upwelling of feeling that unleashes a deluge of memories going back fifty years and more" (73). This happens often; Paco alludes to the war in oblique fashion and the questioner (usually an older male with war-time experience) is prompted to remember. Paco's own experience, his story, lies forgotten by those outside himself. Indeed, we can see Paco's reticence to articulate his story as the resistance to analysis that Freud observes:

> It may be presumed, too, that when people unfamiliar with analysis feel an obscure fear—a dread of rousing something that, so they feel, is better left sleeping—what they are afraid of at bottom is the emergence of this compulsion with its hint of possession by some 'daemonic' power (Freud 43).

Paco retreats from his story because he can sense the pain roiling just beneath the surface, a cruel fact of articulation.

Many scholars have condemned the novel for its lack of progress or movement, including Mark Heberle in “Vietnam Fictions,” but these individuals miss the point. *Paco’s Story* is concerned with the somnambulistic movement of a veteran scarred by war rather than the “combat authenticity” (Heberle 209) of Heinemann’s first novel, *Close Quarters*: “[i]n Paco’s state of deep alienation, the dead are, metaphorically speaking, more real than he himself is” (Hantke 67). His emphatic silence is akin to death, a prerequisite for the assumption of the role of the ghost.

The crushing weight of expectation, and later, experience, drives the somnambulism that characterizes our ghosts: “But I submitted. All the soul searchings and midnight conversations and books and beliefs were voided by abstention, extinguished by forfeiture, for lack of oxygen, by a sort of sleepwalking default. It was no decision, no chain of ideas or reasons, that steered me into the war” (O’Brien *If I Die* 22). The narrator enters the war dormant—asleep—without the perception of agency. This too is an example of haunting. Much in the same way that Paco experiences a symbolic paralysis that manifests as physical and aimless movement, O’Brien’s narrator surrenders to the seeming-inevitability of the war and its horrors. We must be careful to note that the “ordinary” traumas of being drafted and subjected to conditions of deprivation and cruelty are closely-related to the spectacular traumas of combat, but are seldom spoken of. O’Brien’s pre-war narrator harbors trauma just as Heinemann’s Paco does.

> [O]ne step and then the next and then another, but no volition, no will, because it was automatic, it was anatomy, and the war was entirely a matter of posture and carriage, the hump was everything, a kind of inertia, a kind of emptiness, a dullness of desire and intellect and conscience and hope and human sensibility. (O'Brien *Things* 23)

Again, we see the somnambulist soldier, the warrior that "share[s] the weight of memory" (22) with his fellow walkers. The dream-state that they are relegated to is one that prevents progress, physical mobility coupled with emotional immobility. O'Brien's grunts are static, burdened by their war-time experience and unable to escape the inertia that drives them deeper into the horrors of Vietnam. "What sticks to memory, often, are those odd little fragments that have no beginning and no end" (40), the cyclical and interminable fragments that prevent escape.

At every turn, Paco is presented with a chance to articulate his story, to confirm its value or deny its existence. He opts for the latter. A mechanic, giving him a ride into Boone, asks what happened to Paco after Harriette, but Paco wills forgetfulness: "'They had me zonked out on morphine I don't much remember,' Paco says, 'you know?' and that closes the subject. But Paco remembers all right, and vividly" (Heinemann *Paco's* 45). He avoids the telling, willingly relegating himself to the shadow world of silence and ghosts.

"The Bravo Company medic who finds Paco will tell the story of it (this years later) in Weiss's Saloon, over and over again" (Heinemann *Paco's* 20). The repetition of story is that which entraps, closes off the potential for a rearticulation or recreation of the

experience. The medic that coopts Paco's story tells it voyeuristically and for the voyeurs that line the bar; there is no engagement in the event, in the suffering of Paco and the potential for his recovery; it is a long-winded complaint to the conditions of Vietnam and the war wrought there without the emotional value of the place—it is the pornographic that Heinemann invokes later in his memoir, *Black Virgin Mountain* (55). The reader glimpses something of the trauma surrounding Paco's extraction, however, when the Bravo Company medic refuses to return to the field. The sense that something has broken within him because of Paco's experience is evident. Both men make it out of Vietnam, but each contributes to the ghosts of the place, the medic telling the same story of horror "over and over again" while Paco refuses to tell his story and allows it to be made into spectacle by others. On the rare occasion that he embraces a chance for his story, something is missing:

> He has dwelt on it with trivial thoroughness, condensed it, told it as an ugly fucking joke (the whole story dripping with ironic contradiction, and sarcastic and paradoxical bitterness); he's told it stone drunk to other drunks; to high-school buddies met by the merest chance (guys Paco thought he was well rid of, and never thought he'd see the rest of his natural life); to women waiting patiently for him to finish his telling so they could get him into bed, and see and touch all those scars for themselves. There's been folks to whom he's unloaded the whole nine yards, the wretched soul-deadening dread, the grueling, *grinding* shitwork of being a grunt (the bloody murder aside); how he come to be wounded, the miracle of his surviving the massacre—as good as left for dead,

> you understand, James…Paco…immediately distills all that down to a single, simply sentence, squares himself (standing as straight as he can), looks the old man full in the face, and says bluntly, 'I was wounded in the war'. (72-73)

Here, the reader must question both the teller and the witness. Ordinarily, Paco refuses for his story to be given full accounting, he reduces it to the tepid "I was wounded in the war." Paco abandons the full telling of his traumatic event, the birth of his ghosts, because too long has it fallen on deaf ears. The women "waiting patiently for him to finish," the drunks, the chance-encounters with forgotten high-school buddies, each represents empty witnessing; they do not witness *beyond* recognition, they merely encounter his story without *engaging* with it. However, we cannot lay all the blame on the poor witness; Paco is also to blame. As a storyteller, he makes several, purposeful, missteps condensing or reducing his story, lingering on it with "trivial thoroughness," and relating it "stone drunk." None makes for a very compelling story. Paco is crippling his own story, running counter to O'Brien's character Sanders in *The Things They Carried*: "He wanted me to feel the truth, believe by the raw force of feeling…I could tell how desperately Sanders wanted me to believe him, his frustration at not quite getting the details right, not quite pinning down the final and definitive truth" (72-74).

Paco has avoided a "truthful" (here, we must invoke O'Brien's story-truth over happening-truth) telling of his story, reduced it and compacted it into a single, seemingly-ubiquitous sentence, in order to divorce himself from the pain of the experience. To relieve himself of his burden, to banish his ghosts, is to dredge up a core of raw pain that burns in the subconscious. The narrator points to Paco's inability to

engage with such a process, even when he is “unload[ing] the whole nine yards,” he is careful to put the “bloody murder aside.”

The core of Paco’s trauma is not the immolation and utter destruction of Fire Base Harriette; it is the rape and subsequent murder of the Viet Cong woman. The avoidance of that reality prevents Paco from absolution; the telling of his story will never be complete without the engagement of *that* event and those like it. Paco is forced to allow others to mis-tell his story while he himself is trapped in a state of immobility. *Paco’s Story* itself has experienced something of a scholastic immobility in the decades after it became a National Book Award-winning novel. Relatively little scholarship exists on the book, hardly any of it within the last ten years, but seemingly all of the smattering of articles refuse to engage with the horrible rape scene that takes place near the conclusion of the novel—it hangs over *Paco’s Story* like the ghosts that tell it. To ignore the scene is anathema to Heinemann’s purpose, to shock the American public, to make them sit up and pay attention, to defy Paco’s own words that “‘[w]hat’s back of you is behind, done’” (Heinemann *Paco’s* 151): “[Paco] winces and squirms; his whole body jerks, but he cannot choose but remember” (174). Cathy and Marty’s love-making forces Paco down a twisted road of memory, of trauma and violence and scars that refuse to fade. The memory of the rape of the Viet Cong woman is detailed excruciatingly and communicated in a way that demands lucid attention or quiet ignorance. Heinemann dares the reader to confront the horror, to engage with the story of the rape and bloody murder as legitimate emotional value, a factual lie that amounts to a truth about war-time experience in Vietnam. The author implicates the American

public by its unwillingness to look at the mess and the abject cruelty: "The girl was scared shitless, chilly and shuddering, glossy and greasy with sweat, and was all but tempted to ask them as one human being to another not to rape her, not to kill her, but she didn't speak English" (Heinemann *Paco's* 179). Paco's memory of and involvement in the rape is Heinemann's final blow to the reader, a staggering assault upon our conception of "clean" wars and lasting trauma. Heinemann is faithfully adhering to what O'Brien will articulate decades later: "you can tell a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil…If you don't care for obscenity, you don't care for the truth" (*Things* 67-68). In this moment of terrible memory, we understand why Paco is paralyzed, why he is unable to progress past the past:

> And when everyone had had as many turns as he wanted (Paco fascinated by the huge red welt in the middle of her Back), as many turns as he could stand, Gallagher took the girl out behind that bullshit brick-and-stucco hooch, yanking her this way and that by the whole head of her hair (later that afternoon we noticed black hairs on the back of his arm). He had a hold of her the way you'd grab some shrimpy little fucker by the throat—and he slammed her against the wall and hoisted her up until her gnarled toes barely touched the ground. But the girl didn't much fucking care, James. There was spit and snot, blood and drool and cum all over her, and she'd pissed herself. Her eyes had that dead, clammy glare to them, and she didn't seem to know what was happening anymore. Gallagher slipped his .357 Magnum out of its holster and leaned the barrel deftly against her breastbone…Then he put the muzzle of the pistol to her forehead,

> between her eyebrows. He held her up stiffly by the hair and worked his finger on it, to get a good grip…And in the middle of us jostling and grab-assing, Gallagher squeezed off a round. Boom. (Heinemann *Paco's* 182)[12]

The scene is brutal, cruel, and impossibly-detailed. The images swirl into what cannot be called anything but trauma. We must remember that it is not Paco that relates this story, but his whispering ghosts brought on by the unmistakable sounds coming from the room next door where Cathy and Marty engage in an intercourse separated by several orders of magnitude from the rape. This, undoubtedly, is Paco's buried conflict, it is the memory that he resists wincing and squirming and jerking, but returns to him, nonetheless. Where Paco is physically scarred from the events of Fire Base Harriette, he is psychically wounded by the rape and murder of a young, Viet Cong guerilla.

Ultimately, Paco skips town, deferring the potentially-healing engagement with his trauma. For Peebles, this physical movement amounts to the "ghost of [Paco's] possibility for healing" (152) for how "can a community be sustaining if it produced the horror that it endures?" (148). The American public's complicity or direct involvement in the blossoming of the Vietnam War prevents them as being a suitable refuge for individuals like Paco; in the town of Boone all manner of war stories are told, all except Paco's own. While Peebles is fundamentally correct in determining the inadequacy of

[12] It must be noted that to reprint this scene at length is not for the spectacle of violence and rape; it is for the power of Heinemann's prose to confer an emotional weight to the reader. The author demands that you, the reader, be burdened by the scene and that your idea of Vietnam be forever colored by what you have just read. It is not necessarily anything new, but there is an avoidance of this content in scholarship surrounding *Paco's Story*. To ignore, to will forgetfulness, is to actively play into the cultural amnesia that the American public is guilty of.

locales like Boone, the "ghost of his possibility for healing" does not lie in the movement from town to town; the "solution," if indeed there is one for Paco, lies in the enunciation of his own story, a renunciation of his silence, and a concerted effort to reintegrate into human society despite its major failings. In other words, Paco must reconcile his individual memory with that of the collective. One of Heinemann's objectives in writing the novel, then, may have been to invoke this silence that surrounds veterans and implicate the American public in its prolongation. Just as Richard Wright writes *Native Son* as a novel that was "so hard and deep that [the public had] to face it without the consolation of tears" (Wright, n.p.) so too did Heinemann create "an ugly story and an upsetting one, but perhaps all the more necessary because of these qualities" (Peebles 157). We, the readers, are made into witnesses that must question our cultural and historical complicity.

CHAPTER III

SUCCUMBING TO OR BANISHING THE GHOST

> We would see Charlie in our heads: oiled up, ghostly, blending in with the countryside, part of the land. We would listen. What was that sound coming from just beyond the range of vision? A hum? Chanting? We would blink and rub our eyes and wonder about the magic of this place. Levitation, rumblings in the night, shadows, hidden graves. (*If I Die* 28)

Mystery and mysticism veil Vietnam in the darkness of the unknown, clothing it in the trappings of evil. One of the dangers of story is its incessant supply of possibility and how it can be fitted to the unknown. We have the power to trap ourselves with our stories, creating phantoms and demons out of simple darkness. We must recognize too that the gloom we speak of here is two-fold. Not only is the experience of war disorienting and problematic for the soldier, but also that the military narrative involving the pursuit of war's aims is itself disorienting. In other words, the gloom that soldiers are subjected to stems not simply from the experience of war as a confrontation set in a geographically unfamiliar place, but also from the lies that those in authority tell. The shock of war, the traumatic entry to conflict would be enough to haunt an individual, but once coupled with the breach of trust associated with a discontinuity of expectations, it is no surprise that Vietnam becomes a world of "shadows" and "hidden graves." And it is

this expectation that motivates the fright that Freud points to. The obscuring efforts of military authority through story create the conditions for additional trauma.[13]

A conflict almost entirely without clear, set-piece battles or even effective metrics for determining victory are causes for concern when interrogating the military narrative stitched together for the war. The body count metric illustrates just this. Killing more of the enemy than he killed of you becomes an official account of success, but beyond the fact that this method rises only in the uncertainty of the conclusions of firefights and skirmishes, it is incredibly hard to carry out. Numbers are fabricated or assumed and information is sculpted to appear favorable for a variety of reasons, oftentimes simply to appease anxious commanders. A story is crafted in the tallying of bodies, unrecovered or unaccountable bodies become narratives in themselves, victims of decimating artillery or uncertain topography. What we are left with is a disorienting experience that is made exponentially more so by the forming hands of military authority. The expectation that Vietnam would be not altogether unlike World War II or even Korea was forcefully disabused once the soldier was on the ground and the resulting shock helped clothe the country in the gloom these writers point to in various ways.

In the Lake of the Woods shows that though writing can lead to the possibility of recovery or healing, it can also lead to the infinite possibility of entrapment—it can elide the traumatic and keep the harmful effects buried within: "John would sometimes invent

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[13] It would be inaccurate to say that this narrative is responsible for *all* the trauma that filtered out of the Vietnam War, but it is certainly a contributor.

elaborate stories about how he could've saved his father. He imagined all the things he could've done" (O'Brien 244). Wade's method of writing, his particular construction of story, is an escape into solipsism where "[h]is imagination filled in the details" (267) of the experience. As Sorcerer, Wade first tricks his company into the story he weaves before he falls in himself, finally getting "caught up in layers of forgetfulness" (357).

The impulse to "[e]rase the bad stuff" (358) is born out of fear; fear for the contested past and surely for the unknown future. "[A]ttempts to erase individual memory…lead to the destruction of the veteran" (Fuchs 118), because it is a renunciation of identity. The identity that Wade assumes lacks the ability to communicate—John Wade wraps himself in "colossal self-deception" and after barring himself from the world, "he *can't* say anything" (O'Brien *Lake* 418). Having severed his ties to the reality outside himself, he is left alone and haunted, "[t]he horror [is] in his head" (435). Wade, the "good, chivalrous forgetter" (641), tries to "pull off a trick that couldn't be done, which was to remake himself, to vanish what was past and replace it with things good and new" (455). The difference between Wade and Kien is the admission of trauma, the agonistic relationship between the burdened self and the buried memory; Wade engages in a story that amounts to the erasure of the past whereas Kien is willing to give combat a treatment that allows for possibility.

While tragic, Wade's motivations are not condemnable; pain prompting escape resonates with the whole of society: "One way or another, it seems, we all perform vanishing tricks, effacing history, locking up our lives and slipping day by day into the graying shadows" (518). History is a particular project of forgetting: "'active' forgetting

is selective remembering, the recognition that not all past forms of knowledge and not all experiences are beneficial for present and future life" (Ramadanovic 1). There are memories that must be buried, "the past needs to be granted severance" (Hantke 70), but doing so without confronting the "Eternal Return" (the "obsessive return of that which has already happened" [Ramadanovic 4]) of trauma is a mistake. Giving the lie to ourselves can be a method of survival: "Maybe erasure is necessary. Maybe the human spirit defends itself as the body does, attacking infection, enveloping and destroying those malignancies that would otherwise consume us" (O'Brien *Lake* 515) but, the Eternal Return of memory—particularly that of trauma—remains. The "sorcerer's desire to fictionalize, to perform the priestly rite of transforming the painful past into a wondrous illusion" (Melley 126) is a dangerous ritual.

The power of language to entrap is embodied in the use of euphemism, in the reduction of traumatic events into something that is more palatable, but less able to articulate the story that contains the potential for healing: "[W]hen two of them—Tom and Arnold—were killed two months later, the tragedy was somehow lessened and depersonalized by telling ourselves that ol' Ready Whip and Quick got themselves wasted by the slopes" (O'Brien *If I Die* 81). Euphemism is a powerful tool of making diminutive—of compartmentalization: "They used a hard vocabulary to contain the terrible softness. Greased they'd say. Offed, lit up, zapped while zipping. It wasn't cruelty, just stage presence. They were actors" (*Things* 27).

> [W]e had ways of making the dead seem not quite dead. Shaking hands, that was one way. By slighting death, by acting, we pretended it was not the terrible thing

> it was. By our language, which was both hard and wistful, we transformed the bodies into piles of waste. Thus, when someone got killed, as Curt Lemon did, his body was not really a body, but rather one small bit of waste in the midst of a much wider wastage. (218)

Reducing horror and death into mere words is a sword that cuts two ways, a contradiction implicit in euphemism. Engaging in euphemism makes things palatable, but it also obscures the experience and retards the healing that may be present in the telling of story in a "full" way:

> Death was taboo. The word for getting killed was 'wasted'. When you hit a Bouncing Betty and it blows you to bits, you get wasted. Fear was taboo. It could be mentioned, of course, but it had to be accompanied with a shrug and a grin and obvious resignation. All this took the meaning of courage. We could not gaze straight at fear and dying, not, at least, while out in the field, and so there was no way to face the question. (141)

Pain does this—forces euphemism or worse, the inarticulate sounds of suffering: "Oh, we dissolved all right, everybody but Paco, but our screams burst through the ozone" (Heinemann *Paco's* 17). The screams are the ghosts being made in the throes of trauma, forged in the fires of an abject experience that is incommunicable—the scream, the sub-lingual, but very clear-intentioned vocalization, is an attempt at articulation. This is not condemnable, the instinct to shy away from that which has wounded you, but it does not serve as the stiches in the wound. An escape, even from the language of our own

experience, is an allowance for ghosts. In order to begin to rise from the muck and mire of the past, one must first see to the articulation of the event.

Norman Bowker, a veteran crippled by his perception of the past within O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, is defined by his inability to communicate, by his destructive cycle of repetition that is embodied in the chapter "Speaking of Courage." The slow, monotonous circles Bowker finds himself making around the placid, little lake both mentally and physically are markers of his isolation; he is cut off from reality—he is a ghost: "It's almost like I got killed over in Nam…That night when Kiowa got wasted, I sort of sank down into the sewage with him…Feels like I'm still in deep shit" (146). His isolation is apparent in his failure to accept the events of the war as something other than destructive: "I'd write it myself except I can't ever find any words...I can't figure out exactly what to *say*" (147). His story has to be told by the narrator O'Brien; the isolation Bowker has built for himself prevents his participation in the self-renewal that the telling of his story might bring. Bowker's inability to banish his own ghosts participates in ghost-making. Norman Bowker is dead to the world long before he commits suicide, because he built has own cage of alienation from the mental bars of experience, but it is also due to a story that he knows will fall on deaf ears: "The town could not talk, and would not listen…It had no memory, therefore no guilt" (O'Brien *Things* 134-135). The town, a stand-in for the whole of America and its willing amnesia, prevents Norman Bowker from communicating the pain of his war, but it is important to note that he does not *try*.

Bowker's seventeen-page letter, a plea of sorts to the narrator of the novel, oscillates between points of anger and sadness, depression and lethargy. In the sections of the letter that the narrator "includes" within the novel, we learn of Bowker's deferred status as a ghost, a being defined by deaths physical and emotional. The troubled Bowker attempts to cast the burden of the traumatic event onto the narrator, suggesting that he "write a story about a guy who feels like he got zapped over in that shithole" (147). Norman Bowker deals in euphemisms concerning his own death; he (unsuccessfully) hides from the pain wrought in war-time experience and abandons his chance for healing, the "natural, inevitable process" of storytelling that is "partly catharsis, partly communication…a way of grabbing people by the shirt and explaining exactly what happened" (147). O'Brien, the narrator, complicates the power of story to engage with trauma later in the chapter:

> I did not look on my work as therapy, and still don't. Yet when I received Norman Bowker's letter, it occurred to me that the act of writing had led me through a swirl of memories that might otherwise have ended in *paralysis or worse*. By telling stories, you objectify your own experience. You separate it from yourself. You pin down certain truths. You make up others. You start sometimes with an incident that truly happened, like the night in the shit field, and you carry it forward by inventing incidents that did not in fact occur but that nonetheless help to clarify and explain. (147-148; emphasis added)

O'Brien (through his narrator) points to the *possibility* of story as well as the consequences of ignoring that which has been buried in the subconscious of the potential

teller. While explicating the ghost-like existence of Norman Bowker after the war, O'Brien also revivifies the character by demonstrating the power of story to banish the ghost through unmaking—Norman Bowker is no longer relegated to the confines of a tepid lake or the locker room of the YMCA; he is re-introduced to the world with personhood restored. The dreaming in which the "dead sometimes smile and sit up and return to the world" (206) that O'Brien concludes the novel with opposes the sort of haunting I have been speaking of thus far. Rather than returning the dead to the world to set them to haunt as extensions of trauma, the return of the dead in *The Things They Carried* can be understood as honorific, an acknowledgement of the possibility that story presents and embracing the chance of healing by engaging with the traumatic event. Rather than banishment, we are dealing with disarmament.

> I should forget it. But the things about remembering is that you don't forget. You take your material where you find it, which is in your life, at the intersection of past and present. The memory-traffic feeds into a rotary up on your head, where it goes in circles for a while, then pretty soon imagination flows in and the traffic merges and shoots off down a thousand different streets. As a writer, all you can do is pick a street and go for the ride, putting things down as they come to you. That's the real obsession. All those stores. (O'Brien *Things* 39)

If I Die in a Combat Zone, O'Brien's published personal narrative, encounters the author's war-time experience and borders on the fiction that he will assemble in *The Things They Carried*. However we classify it—memoir, autobiography, personal narrative—O'Brien's book can be understood as raw dream-space in which factually-

true events are appropriated or converted into story that represent emotional truths present in the originary experiences. In other words, O'Brien's literal experiences (understood as factual accounts of events) are recrafted and retold through both *If I Die in a Combat Zone* and *The Things They Carried*; each iteration pushes against the boundaries of factual experience and emerges into the zone where story—manipulated to accommodate truths beyond experience—can become valuable to enterprises of healing.

The same shit field O'Brien details in his memoir appears again in his fictional account of the war—the ghost of that experience extends itself, persisting in both the 1975 publication and the 1990 one. That shit field, more than a physical landscape, acts as one of the many spaces in which O'Brien makes sense of trauma and unburies the past. Just as the same yellow cabins owned by Elroy Berdahl in "On the Rainy River" appear in *In the Lake of the Woods* as the setting of Kathy Wade's disappearance, the shit field that claims McElhaney (*If I Die*...) and later Kiowa (*Things*…) is a plane on which trauma is mapped and made sensible. It is entirely possible that O'Brien unburdens himself of his ghosts in these spaces, working to banish them through an engagement with the memory born of war-time experience; however, we must not be fooled into thinking that such a process is a painless or expedient one. In O'Brien's case, decades of crafting and recrafting have gone into this exorcism, and despite O'Brien's own skepticism of "writing as therapy," he admits (at the very least) the power of writing to stave off "paralysis or worse" (*Things* 147).

Despite the horrors of war and the crippling weight of experience, there is hope for healing, or at the very least, recuperation that takes the form of storytelling.

“[O]vercoming trauma by ‘exorcising the ghosts of the past’ is crucially tied to the process of storytelling itself” (Hantke 68). Through a process of remembering—of reactualization—a victim of trauma can rejoin the living and banish the ghosts of conflict: “as I write about these things, the remembering is turned into a kind of rehappening” (O’Brien *Things* 37). Such a process requires the individual to dredge up the specters of memory and confront them—to engage with the traumatic memory that has, up to this point, been buried in the subconscious. This reoccurrence of the memory can be seen as performance: “memory always implies an act of performance in which not factual truth is the cornerstone but the inquiry over various types of meaning” (Mihăilescu 71). The progression of communication through performance is critical as “trauma…takes shape when language breaks down” (Ng 87). Writing, which is never to be seen simply as an act, is at once fiercely private and social; the writer writes to convey the imbedded truth of experience, the “happening-truth” (O’Brien *Things* 171), but he must also recognize that it is ultimately a social act, one that necessitates reading, an enticement of the external audience: “The thing about a story is that you dream it as you tell it, hoping that others might then dream along with you, and in this way memory and imagination and language combine to make spirits in the head” (211), because “[t]hat’s what a story does. The bodies are animated. You make the dead talk” (212). There is communication in writing: “[w]hat stories can do, I guess, is make things present” (172). The characters of these stories are writers and readers, participants of trauma and its communication. Through the process of writing, these characters are able

to restore autonomy to themselves. “Writing is…transformed into the utmost commemorative act” (Um 341) by its allegiance to a critical inquiry of memory.

“How deeply moved he was, and how he trembled at the joy and the pain the memories brought. He wanted to etch into his heart these memories, and wondered how he could have forgotten this tragedy for so many years” (Ninh 35). Kien’s sudden onrush of war memories can be seen as his impetus to write, to “etch into his heart these memories” and confront the tragedy of war, head-on. However, this process—as it is for O’Brien’s narrator and Heinemann’s Paco—involves pain: “From now on life may always be dark, full of suffering, with brief moments of happiness…So many tragic memories, so much pain from long ago that I have told myself to forget, yet it is that easy to return to them” (44). The war grips Kien even after its conclusion, his escape route has not yet come into focus: “When will my heart be free of the tight grip of war? Whether pleasant or ugly memories, they are there to stay for ten, twenty years, perhaps forever” (44). Writing becomes the exit from the deadly circle that war creates, the proximity of his memories offers potential: “My memories of war are always close by, easily provoked at random moments in these days which are little but a succession of boring, predictable, stultifying weeks” (44). A ghost of Kien walks and only a break from the repetitive and denigrating trauma of war will return him to the living.

“Each page revived one story of death after another and gradually the stories swirled back deep into the primitive jungles of war, quietly restoking his horrible furnace of war memories” (Ninh 57). A contradiction of story arises: the story, recrafted and witnessed by the self, has the ability to banish the ghost born of traumatic

experience, but it appears as if story allows the ghosts to coalesce and permits the persistence of pain wrought in the crucible of war. Story becomes a balancing act on a knife-edge; the writer/rememberer approaches that vanishing point where story entraps and perpetuates the ghost and stops just before the precipice.

Once Kien accepts the call to write, he is faced with a host of new challenges. It would be a mistake to assume that the process would be a simple and painless one and Ninh artfully illustrates this:

> On some nights, he energetically follows a certain line, pursuing it sentence by sentence, page by page, building it into a substantial work. He wrestles with it, becomes consumed by it, then in a flash sees it is all irrelevant. Standing back from it he then sees no value in the frantic work, for the story-line stands beyond that circled arena of his soul, that little secret area which we all know intuitively contains our spiritual reserves. (Ninh 49)

Kien "wrestles" with the work, *engages* with story in a way that figures like Norman Bowker and Paco refuse to. His "frantic work" is one of pain and desperation, but the value it lacks is only due to the impossibility of representation. The entirety of war stands outside of Kien, "beyond that circled arena of his soul" and cannot be reduced to mere description. Instead, Kien must embrace the aesthetic in the spaces where representation fails and make story from the suffocating memories of his own experience: "It is something else that needs to be addressed, something intangible, other than the writing. So, he begins again, writing and waiting, writing and waiting, sometimes nervous, overexcited" (49). Simply *writing* is not enough. In order to banish

the ghosts of trauma that haunt him, Kien must commit to the recrafting of story that requires an engagement with the events as opposed to a simple retelling. Kien must act as witness to his own experience, a witness that witnesses beyond recognition, a witness that—outside of himself—makes sense of this tangled mass of events that constitutes a life. “The sorrows of war and his nostalgia drove him down into the depths of his imagination. From there his writing could take substance” (Ninh 173). The critical piece that Kien had been missing remained in the depths of himself; the push that drives him to “substance” (which we can understand as the story that has the *potential* to heal) is the bitter-sweet tang of the past, the memory of war.

A dedicated and emphatic process of writing may catalyze healing by drawing the shards of memory from the victim. The impetus for remembrance, for reactualization, is a powerful desire, perhaps even a duty[14]: “[h]e wanted to etch into his heart these memories, and wondered how he could have forgotten this tragedy for so many years” (35). Writing becomes necessary, a means of return: “It was necessary to write about the war, to touch readers’ hearts, to move them with words of love and sorrow, to bring to life the electric moments, to let them, in the reading and telling, feel they were there, in the past, with the author” (56). Kien is reaching out to the world, offering communication in the face of trauma; it is a transcendent gesture, but one that is not without pain:

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[14] “He alone must meet this writing challenge, his last duty as a soldier” (*Sorrow* 50). In addition, “His memories that afternoon reawakened in his the sense of sacred duty. He felt that he must press on to fulfill his obligations, his duty as a writer” (56). And finally, “I must write! To rid myself of these devils, to put my tormented soul finally to rest instead of letting it float in a pool of shame and sorrow” (146).

All through the night he wrote, a lone figure in this untidy, littered room…He wrote, cruelly reviving the images of his comrades, of the mortal combat in the jungle that became Screaming Souls, where his battalion had met its tragic end…Kien arose, wearily trudging away from the house and out along the pavement, a lonely-looking soul wandering in the beautiful sunshine. The tensions of the tumultuous night had left him yet still he felt unbalanced, an eerie feeling identical to that which beset him after being wounded for the first time. Coming around after losing consciousness he had found himself in the middle of the battlefield, bleeding profusely. But this was the beautiful, calm Nguyen Du Street, and there was the familiar Thuyen Quang lake from his childhood. Familiar but not quite the same, for after that long, mystical night everything now seemed changed. Even his own soul; he felt a stranger unto himself. Even the clouds floating in from the northeast seemed to be dyed a different color, and just below the skyline Hanoi's old grey roofs seemed to sparkle in the sunshine as though just sprinkled with water. For that whole Sunday Kien wandered the streets in a trance, feeling a melancholy joy, like dawn mixed with dusk. He believed he had been born again, and the bitterness of his recent postwar years faded. Born again into the prewar years, to resurrect the deep past within him, and this would continue until he had relived a succession of his life and times; the first new life was to be that of his distant past. His lost youth, before the sorrow of war. (86-87)

Kien's emergence into the palpability of the present is based on his ability to reconnect with his past, the "lost youth" that disintegrated in the dawn of the war. Kien's proclaimed rebirth or resurrection is not without an old pain, one that recalls him to the battlefield and its characteristic gore and greenery. To unbury the wounds of the past, to relieve oneself of the traumatic, involves an engagement with the associated pain. The pain, perhaps somewhat muted by its repression, is analogous to a wound received on the battlefield, but never identical—the pain of *un*burial differs in kind, if not scale; Kien's return to the world of the living, a world of choice and agency, is unavoidably painful. "Kien's soldiers' stories came from beyond the grave and told of their lives beyond death" (90). Here, the story that Kien forwards is one in which the ghosts are granted subjectivity, he bridges the divide between worlds and breathes "life" into the dead. It can be nothing other than a recognition of the ghost and its operation, and as such, it serves as a step in Kien's progress; he recognizes the ghosts of his war-time experience and makes them visible, holds them before his eyes and unburies them from the graves within him.

Kien is ultimately drained from the experience. There is a sense of alienation in the act (much like there is in the experience of trauma), but also one of "being born again," a resurrection that allows him to encounter the "deep past within him" and banish the ghosts of trauma. Just as this process brings with it a feeling of emptiness, so too does it engender a sort of completion within the author: "Now that he had written it [the novel] he had no use for it. The novel was the ash from this exorcism of devils" (114). Kien's soul "had not been eroded by a cloudy memory" (233), he has survived the

war and the trauma, and he has written to “insert his identity back into history” (Ng 94). The retelling—the re-experience of a horror of the eternal present—is the “performance of war memory” (Mihăilescu 73) that grants reprieve and affirms that “language is ultimately a means by which recuperation from trauma becomes possible” (Ng 88). However, we must understand the limits of this recuperation and its inability to absolve the individual of their traumatic experience. We can only hope to lighten the load.

Characters such as John Wade and Paco succumb to paralysis; they trap themselves in silence or wreath themselves in lies; they admit themselves into the ranks of specters that haunt across space and time. By engaging with the experience through deconstruction and recrafting, O’Brien’s narrator (and quite possibly Tim O’Brien himself) removes himself from the process of ghost-making. The dual threat of the ghost, those we carry and those we become, is dissolved through the stories we must tell: “I was a soldier of the most ordinary kind and the war took much away from me, but the war also gave me a story that simply would not be denied, as well as a way of looking at the world” (Heinemann *Paco’s* xi).

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSIONS

While the method of story that struggles against the submerged trauma—the process of reaching out into the world to anchor the self and accept life—appears to be the most promising approach for healing, it is limited. Scars, both physical and psychological, persist in the aftermath: "Losses can be made good, damage can be repaired, and wounds will heal in time. But the psychological scars of the war will remain forever" (Ninh 193). This is also noted in Heinemann's *Black Virgin Mountain*: "My war-year was like a nail in my head, like a corpse in my house, and I wanted it out, but for the longest time now, I have had the unshakable, melancholy understanding that the war will always be vividly present in me, a literal physical, palpable sensation" (46). Both like and unlike a wound, the effects of trauma are impossible to address without a process of performative writing but even then the healing is never complete. In addition, writing itself can actually force the writer to re-experience the pain of the past without a guarantee of closure—the wound can be reopened only to continue to bleed (Cathy Caruth's "speaking wound" is important to acknowledge) in well-meaning masochism: "the act of writing is now both a symptom of…trauma and a conduit through which it can resurface" (Ng 91). We must also consider the communicative nature of trauma and question what impact the telling of trauma has on the reader. There is a very real danger of the pain wrought in the initial experience of the traumatic to "echo" in the reader, creating an emotional pain that is not inconsiderable and cannot be overlooked.

However, these concerns are beyond the scope of this thesis. My immediate concerns have been to address the lack of attention paid to some of the Vietnam War's most valuable literature and to reinstitute these texts as crucial places of departure when assessing contemporary war literature.

No matter the circumstances of the characters discussed, whether they apparently failed or succeeded in the war against trauma, they all disappear. *Paco's Story* ends with Paco moving on from the small town of Boone, continuing his scarred existence in constant deferment; in *The Sorrow of War,* Kien vanishes from his town, leaving his door open and his manuscript scattered; and John Wade, Sorcerer, takes a boat out into the Lake of the Woods and fades into a new ghost country. A reconciliation of individual and collective memory is required to keep veterans from fading away and becoming ghosts locked in a final silence. These individual voices demand to be admitted into our cultural memory; the experience must be written back into the larger project of history.

It would be appropriate here in my conclusions to address the existence of these selected texts as ghosts of our literary world. They persist as reminders of traumatic memory—they haunt in hopes of communicating the loss and the pain that exists between their covers. These are the ghosts that stay with us, that demand attention and force us to sit up and take notice or face the repetition of the events they disclose. We cannot banish these texts-as-ghosts; we can only hope to grant them prominence and learn from them.

A great deal remains to be said in regard to the power of creative writing to *literally* heal affected subjects. Several studies have already been implemented to these

ends and deserve careful consideration as they may yet yield promising ways to cope with the traumatic. I would like to take this opportunity to point some of these studies: Nina Sayer et al. and “Randomized Controlled Trial of Online Expressive Writing to Address Readjustment Difficulties Amongst U.S. Afghanistan and Iraq War Veterans” and Karmin Michelle Copen’s dissertation “Writing the Wrong: Meaning Making Through Creative Writing for Male Combat Veterans Diagnosed with PTSD” provide exceptional places to begin this project.

The trauma of war penetrates the individual and takes up residence beneath the conscious self; the damage that both is and is not a wound, is unavoidable, it is the horrific presence of violent experience. However, the way this trauma can be addressed is varied. The individual can engage in a violent conflict with the memory (akin to war) and can work to reintegrate into society through a communication of the self to the Other, to render the individual experience to the cultural history. The “[i]nescapability of historical reality” (Franklin 342) requires that the performance of individuals stave off the willful forgetting of the collective consciousness that threatens “[f]or the war to be seen as a noble cause…[a] history…thoroughly rewritten and reimaged” (334). The experience can be infinitely deferred, forcing a person to stomach the corrosive memory without reprieve, or an individual can choose to wrap themselves in deception; they can create a narrative that eludes the memory—erases it and abandons the community that lay in the external. Ghosts can be confronted and banished or ignored and left to their haunts, but only through the agency of the subject can the former be accomplished. Without the willful action of the affected, the ghosts in the gloom of our memory are

allowed to coalesce in the shadowy corners of our minds and make manifest the traumas we endure.

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