

THE TRUE WAR STORY: ONTOLOGICAL RECONFIGURATION  
IN THE WAR FICTION OF KURT VONNEGUT AND TIM O'BRIEN

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THE TRUE WAR STORY:

ONTOLOGICAL RECONFIGURATION IN THE WAR FICTION OF

KURT VONNEGUT AND TIM O'BRIEN

This thesis applies the ontological turn to the war fiction of veteran authors, Kurt Vonnegut and Tim O'Brien. It argues that some veteran authors desire to communicate truth through fiction. Choosing to communicate truth through fiction hints at a new perspective on reality and existence that may not be readily accepted or understood by those who lack combat experience. The non-veteran understanding of war can be more informed by entertaining the idea that a multiplicity of realities exists. Affirming the combat veteran reality—the post-war ontology—and acknowledging the non-veteran reality—rooted in what I label “pre-war” or “civilian” ontology—helps enhance the reader's understanding of what veteran authors attempt to communicate through fiction. This approach reframes the dialogic interaction between the reader and the perspectives presented in veteran author's fiction through an emphasis on “radical alterity”<sup>1</sup> to the point that telling and reading such stories represent distinct ontological journeys.

Both Kurt Vonnegut and Tim O'Brien provide intriguing perspectives on reality through their fiction, particularly in the way their characters perceive and express morality, guilt, time, mortality, and even existence. Vonnegut and O'Brien's war experiences inform these perspectives. This does not imply that the authors hold an identical perspective on the world or that combat experience yields an ontological understanding of the world common to every veteran. It simply asserts that applying the

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<sup>1</sup> “Radical alterity” refers to the manner in which a person residing in a particular ontology may perceive the perspective of another human being residing a significantly different ontology.

ontological turn to these writings, and the writings of other combat veterans, reveals that those who experience combat first-hand often walk away from those experiences with a changed ontological perspective.

Tom Marvin, PhD

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## Section I – Overview

“I have told my sons that they are not under any circumstances to take part in massacres, and that the news of massacres of enemies is not to fill them with satisfaction or glee.

• • •

I have also told them not to work for companies which make massacre machinery, and to express contempt for people who think we need machinery like that.”

~Kurt Vonnegut *Slaughterhouse Five*~

“The point is that war is war no matter how it’s perceived. War has its own reality. War kills and maims and rips up the land and makes orphans and widows. These are the things of war. Any war.”

~Tim O’Brien *Going After Cacciato*~

In recent decades some anthropologists have chosen to emphasize ontology in their work. This trend, commonly referred to as “the ontological turn,” suggests that people, cultures, perspectives, beliefs, etc. are not to be understood as “merely culturally or socially differentiated from one another, but also different-in-being; not alter as in alternative but as in radical alter – ontologically different in core and kind” (Vigh and Sausdale 50). Championed by theorist like Alberti, Labour, Deleuze, and Viveiros de Castro, the ontological turn encourages people to consider the possibility that “distinct and incommensurable worlds” exist, and suggests that emphasizing “ideas of radical alterity and essentialism” promotes a new perspective on “otherness” without favoring an “occidental (‘Euro-American’ ontological) perspective” (Vigh and Sausdale, 50). This ontological turn encourages essentialism and is typically applied to cultures that are radically different and often isolated from each other. Western educated anthropologists, for example, may argue that Amerindians possess a worldview that is radically different from the West. By acknowledging a multiplicity of realities, they try to affirm the

Amerindian worldview without condescension. The motivation is to provide “ethnographic justice” to other perspectives by perceiving and accepting alterity.

This thesis applies the ontological turn to the war fiction of veteran authors, Kurt Vonnegut and Tim O’Brien. Beginning in Section II, I make the case that some veteran authors desire to communicate truth through fiction, rather than other media such as memoirs. I argue that this use of fiction hints at a new perspective on reality and existence that may not be readily accepted or understood by those who lack combat experience. This is not to suggest that readers, uninitiated in combat experience, are ignorant fools, incapable of comprehending the real truth about war. Instead, I contend that the non-veteran understanding of war can be more informed by entertaining the idea that a multiplicity of realities exists. Affirming the combat veteran reality—the post-war ontology—and acknowledging the non-veteran reality—rooted in what I label “pre-war” or “civilian” ontology—helps enhance the reader’s understanding of what veteran authors attempt to communicate through fiction. This approach reframes the dialogic interaction between the reader and the perspectives presented in veteran author’s fiction through an emphasis on “radical alterity”<sup>2</sup> to the point that telling and reading such stories represent distinct ontological journeys.

Both Kurt Vonnegut and Tim O’Brien provide intriguing perspectives on reality through their fiction, particularly in the way their characters perceive and express morality, guilt, time, mortality, and even existence. Vonnegut and O’Brien’s war experiences inform these perspectives. This does not imply that the authors hold an identical perspective on the world or that combat experience yields an ontological

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<sup>2</sup> “Radical alterity” refers to the manner in which a person residing in a particular ontology may perceive the perspective of another human being residing a significantly different ontology.



understanding of the world common to every veteran. It simply asserts that applying the ontological turn to these writings, and the writings of other combat veterans, reveals that those who experience combat first-hand often walk away from those experiences with a changed ontological perspective.

Section III develops the idea that the Ontological Turn should perhaps be applied to combat veterans as well, particularly veterans who write fiction as a means of processing and communicating their war-time experience. This approach asks readers to question their presumed state of normality as they approach these texts. Doing so allows the reader to attain a new perspective on the realities that are described in veteran war fiction. It encourages readers to consider ideas that fail to align with their ontological constructs, rather than dismissing them as either mere artistic license or the results of authors' wounded psyches. An ontological interpretation attempts to complicate the non-veteran reader's presumed state of normality by acknowledging that both the readers and the veteran authors may possess different, yet equally valid, understandings of reality. For example, an ontology that lacks the perspective of trauma takes certain binaries for granted. These same binaries are complicated in the war fiction of some veteran authors as new ontological categories evolve in a post-trauma ontology. By "assert[ing] the reality of worlds as people understand them"<sup>3</sup> readers have the opportunity to gain a perspective on war that is easily missed when their perspective is informed primarily through movies, historical texts, political rhetoric, news media, and other traditional modes of communication. This approach attempts to validate the perspective that the veteran authors convey through fiction.

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<sup>3</sup> Harris and Robb 668

Applying the ontological to such works encourages readers, uninitiated in the combat experience, to consider the limits of their ontological constructs, making them more receptive to the “true” war story. In order to illustrate this point, it seemed prudent to examine the fiction of more than one veteran author. Vonnegut and O’Brien were selected because even though both used their war experiences to inform their fiction, their war experiences took place in different contexts. They fought in different wars, belong to different generations, and the way American culture tends to perceive their respective wars varies significantly. Generally speaking, Americans regard World War II as a necessary triumph over absolute evil,<sup>4</sup> whereas the Vietnam War is often regarded as a mistake. During WWII Vonnegut enlisted in the army before his change in status from student deferment (2S) to 1A went into effect; O’Brien was drafted to fight in Vietnam and participated reluctantly. In spite of these differences, the perspective on war displayed in the fiction of these authors shows considerable synergy. Both refuse to ascribe a sense of purpose and accomplishment to their respective conflicts, choosing instead to treat war as an entity—a catalyst for ontological change. Both emphasize that children, rather than men<sup>5</sup>, fight in these conflicts, and, as a result, a new category—war/youth—manifests in a host of new ontological categorizations, thus revealing an interesting trend in the war fiction of two of the most prominent and widely-read American, veteran authors writing in latter half of the twentieth century.

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<sup>4</sup> Vonnegut exposes the danger of assuming that Americans are the good guys and their enemies are bad guys in *Mother Night*. He subtly reiterates this caution in *Slaughterhouse Five* by emphasizing the humanity of German soldiers and the inhumanity of war—regardless of who participates.

<sup>5</sup> I explore this notion in-depth in Section IV.

## Section II – The *True* War Story and the Antiwar Impulse in American Literature “ALL THIS HAPPENED, more or less.”

~Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five*

The American chapter of world literature reflects a “perdurable affinity” between writing and war.<sup>6</sup> As John Limon points out, “America is a nation made by war,” so naturally a significant portion of American literature examines war on some level. Many of the most well-known American cultural icons, including the national anthem, venerate war, and this may lead to an assumption that American culture historically reflects a predominantly pro-war attitude. Yet, Cynthia Wachtell points out that even though American literature includes “thousands of writers” who attempt to justify war as divinely sanctioned, levied in self-defense, or simply a necessary consequence of freedom, there also exists a pervasive “anti-war impulse in American Literature” (2). Texts written by notable authors such as Ben Franklin, Mark Twain, and Walt Whitman support this notion. While one could argue that the “antiwar impulse” in American literature gained considerable traction during the latter half of the twentieth century in response to the quagmire in Vietnam, it is also important to note that these more contemporary iterations are part of an enduring literary tradition that attempts to challenge the idea that war is a necessary and venerable enterprise.

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<sup>6</sup> A cursory glance at literary history reveals that writers have used literature as a medium for depicting war since the medium’s inception. Ancient texts such as *The Iliad* and *The Epic of Gilgamesh* reveal that storytellers from ancient oral traditions explored this topic, and it continues to appear in the work of writers from all eras of recorded history: poets, playwrights, orators, journalists, novelists, etc. The motivations for examining war through narrative vary from advocacy to denunciation, usually either articulating nationalistic fervor or advocating outright disdain for senseless carnage. Regardless of intent, the connection between writing and war is obvious and longstanding. John Limon acknowledges this in *Writing After War: American War Fiction from Realism to Postmodernism*, and goes so far as to suggest that war predicates the entire existence of literature. While this may be overstated, he correctly acknowledges that *writing* and *war* are paradoxically “skewed enterprises” that also have “a perdurable affinity” (4).

Kurt Vonnegut and Tim O'Brien are members of a more recent class of writers who add an intriguing chapter to this longstanding anti-war impulse in American literature. Both are veterans who experienced combat first-hand and walked away from those experiences with an informed perspective on war that many of their readers lack. Like most anti-war authors, they disabuse their readers of notions of courage, bravery, honor, and valor. They, along with their contemporaries, write from a considerably different context than their predecessors, though. No longer is war so widely celebrated that antiwar perspectives are relegated to the margins of a culture's conscience, scarcely heard in the midst of booming parades and patriotic hymns. Over the last fifty years, the anti-war position has evolved into a dominant force in American literature and film. Yet, in spite of these gains, a close reading of Vonnegut and O'Brien's fiction reveals that both authors believe that there remains a dichotomy between the way many Americans perceive war and the way that some veterans perceive it. Most Americans encounter war only through movies, history books, political rhetoric, journalism, and other news venues. Vonnegut and O'Brien object to the perspectives on war that these venues often produce, and both authors satirize this in their fiction. Vonnegut and O'Brien attempt to write "true war stories" in order to show uninitiated readers that many civilian notions about armed conflicts are incomplete, since the most accessible modes of education on the topic strongly suggest that war has purpose and order. While veterans and non-veterans alike read the works of Vonnegut and O'Brien, both authors keep the non-veteran reader in mind when writing war fiction because both concern themselves primarily with communicating a unique perspective on war, informed by first-hand, front-line experience.

Both authors deride disingenuously romanticized war narratives that tend to inform America's cultural understanding regarding the purpose and worthiness of war. Correcting cultural perceptions about war proves difficult, and both authors allude to the difficulties throughout their narratives. Exploring the nature of these challenges and understanding the way each author attempts to communicate truth through fiction serves as the primary aim of this thesis.

As writers of postmodern fiction, Vonnegut and O'Brien directly contest an underlying assumption that backs an old proverb: "truth is the first casualty of war." The adage assumes, as Cynthia Watchell rightly points out, that objective truth exists (2). While postmodern thinking casts doubt on the very notion of objective truth, Vonnegut and O'Brien's fiction demonstrates that challenging the idea of objective truth does not necessitate a simplistic denial of its existence. They take a more agnostic position: Truth may exist, but no one can fully comprehend it with any degree of certainty. They, like other veterans, have seen a side of war that most Americans have not, and their informed perspectives reveal that politicizing oversimplifies complicated realities of true war. Their fiction attempts to communicate a perspective that counters the propaganda that masks war's carnage and immense wastes.

Rather than conveying their experiences as objective, historical fact, Vonnegut and O'Brien relay war memories as something otherworldly and ineffable—occurrences that are difficult to comprehend even with the benefit of first-hand experience and even more difficult to articulate. In this respect their work paradoxically challenges and affirms Walt Whitman's prescient lament, "real war will never get into the books."<sup>7</sup> By

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<sup>7</sup> Whitman, Walt. "101. The Real War Will Never Get in the Books. Specimen Days. Whitman, Walt. 1892. Prose Works."

attempting to communicate the reality of war in telling “true” war stories through fiction, Vonnegut and O’Brien address Whitman’s concern, but they also acknowledge the difficulty in conveying “real war.” For Vonnegut and O’Brien, a true war story relays the war experience in a manner that the audience, many of whom have no direct familiarity with combat, will understand. Unfortunately, the best attempts to convey an authentic war experience may not succeed, because Vonnegut and O’Brien emphasize that the reality that combat veterans experience radically differs from that of uninitiated readers. Both discuss the challenge of this endeavor often enough in their fiction for it to become an important theme, and it also prompts experiments in storytelling technique such as non-linear plot structures and blending genres (i.e. autobiography and creative nonfiction with science fiction, fantasy, and war fiction). This suggests that telling a true war story serves as more than a thematic element in their fiction—it also informs style and method. Vonnegut demonstrates this in *Slaughterhouse Five*<sup>8</sup> and O’Brien carries it on in *Going After Cacciato*<sup>9</sup> and *The Things They Carried*.<sup>10</sup> The very layout of these narratives—including fictive autobiography and non-linear plot structures—suggests attempts to encourage cultural resistance against war propaganda. Both explicitly counter the notion that war is orderly and purposeful at different points in the narratives, but they also subtly

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<sup>8</sup> For this thesis, I rely on the 2009 Dell Trade Paperback edition. As far as I know, this edition does not vary in any substantive way from the version that was originally published in 1969

<sup>9</sup> I rely on the 1999 Broadway Books edition of *Going After Cacciato*. While the wrappers of this paperback edition indicate that it is a “National Book Award Winner,” O’Brien made small, yet substantive, edits to the book, particularly sections regarding the title character, Cacciato, about a decade after the book was originally published in 1978. (He apparently felt that Cacciato was too cartoonish in the original publication.) This edition and others published after 1990, therefore, differ from the version of the book that won the award. According to Nicholas Basebanes, O’Brien made the edits and the publisher quietly slipped the changes into the next printing in the late 1980s or early 1990s (Basebanes 240-244). For the purpose of this thesis, I choose to work with the version of the text that is most widely circulated in 2015.

<sup>10</sup> I use the First Mariner Books edition, published in 2009, for this thesis.

address it through their refusal to adhere to traditional narrative technique. In so doing, they attempt to convey accurate, yet imaginative, war experiences.

While they are certainly not the only veterans who have attempted to process their experiences and inform others through their writing, examining a sample of Vonnegut and O'Brien's work affords a unique perspective—not just on the most culturally significant American military conflicts of the twentieth century, but on war in general. O'Brien, for example, uses fiction to articulate trauma resulting from his combat experience in Vietnam that goes beyond clinical descriptions of PTSD<sup>11</sup> in the sense that rather than detailing the lingering effects of trauma with a laundry list of nightmares, flashbacks, bouts of insomnia, etc., he attempts to artistically demonstrate the essence of war to an uninitiated audience. Both authors subtly treat war as an entity—a destructive force—that lacks definite purpose. Their fiction questions the moral and political purposes that tend to be culturally assigned to specific wars.

Examining Vonnegut and O'Brien's work together affords this audience an opportunity to understand war and its consequences on a level that more traditional modes of communication are unlikely to provide. The manner in which they communicate these “true” war stories stands in contrast to the conventional way of narrating history and biography by complicating, and at times inverting, notions of bravery, heroism, masculinity, and honor that are supposedly attained by proving one's self in battle. In spite of the cultural gains that the antiwar movement has made since the mid-twentieth century, these latter attributes continue to be widely venerated in popular American culture as many historical accounts, biographies, political speeches, and films

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<sup>11</sup> Mark Herble explicates this in *A Trauma Artist: Tim O'Brien and the Fiction of Vietnam*, and demonstrates that this is an ongoing theme throughout O'Brien's bibliography.

tend to recount war experiences in sequential, chronological order through linear narrative.<sup>12</sup> Vonnegut and O'Brien are concerned that such methods perpetuate a pervasive, status quo adherence to American exceptionalism, which often leads to a dangerous assumption that prevails in U.S. cultural nationalism: Americans are the good guys. This assumption makes it easy to dehumanize the other side, and their fiction attempts to complicate patriotic notions of good vs. evil that are often attached to cultural perceptions of war.<sup>13</sup>

In their fiction Vonnegut and O'Brien deride such oversimplifications by the manner in which they tell their stories. In *Slaughterhouse Five*, Vonnegut accomplishes this by contrasting his novel with traditional, romantic war stories. One of the more direct examples of this occurs when the narrator, who appears to be an amalgamation of a fictive and autobiographical Vonnegut, describes a sexual encounter between Billy Pilgrim, the novel's protagonist, and Valencia. The two sleep together on their

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<sup>12</sup> Some examples include:

- *Lone Survivor: The Eyewitness Account of Operation Redwing and the Lost Heroes of SEAL Team 10* (2007)
- *Unbroken: A World War II Story of Survival, Resilience, and Redemption* (2010)
- *American Sniper: The Autobiography of the Most Lethal Sniper in U.S. Military History* (2012)
- *No Easy Day: The Firsthand Account of the Mission that Killed Osama Bin Laden* (2012)
- *Service: A Navy SEAL at War* (2012)

<sup>13</sup> Again, Vonnegut emphasizes in *Mother Night* that Nazi soldiers were every bit as human as the Allied soldiers, and he satirizes people who attempt to dehumanize all German soldiers. In no way does he endorse the Nazi party; he simply cautions readers against blatant prejudice, even when prejudices seem justified and are promoted by the larger culture. For Vonnegut, dehumanizing German soldiers from WWII puts the critic at risk of falling into the same moral failings of which the Nazis were guilty. Similarly, in *Slaughterhouse Five*, Vonnegut ascribes the term "Nazi" directly to a German soldier only once; the rest of the time he emphasizes their humanity in his descriptions. Kunze (2012) also points out Vonnegut's reluctance to use the term, explaining that it "indicates that Nazism is not an innate state of being, but rather an ideology in which one willingly participates." Vonnegut is aware of the connotations of the term, and he avoids using it because he wants to avoid affirming the notion that the Allies represented "pure good" while the Nazis were "pure evil." (50) While Vonnegut "frustrates many readers because he won't [...] choose sides, ascribing blame and penalty, identifying good guys and bad," "Vonnegut does succeed in showing that good and evil are not opposite states of being, but rather points on a continuum of human action, constantly in flux from moment-to-moment and decision-to-decision." (53)



honeymoon. Afterward, Valencia asks Billy about his experiences in World War II. The pages are then graced with this lovely remark:

“It was a simple-minded thing for a female Earthling to do,  
to associate sex and glamor with war.” (154)

Blatant sexism aside, the narrator clearly believes that such associations should not be made, and he demonstrates a willingness to offend members of his reading audience in order to make his point. This derisive tone also appears earlier in the novel when Vonnegut satirizes traditional war stories through Roland Weary. Weary—a childish bully and incompetent soldier—functions as a mouthpiece for clichés drawn from war fiction. The reader first encounters him in a dire predicament—lost in enemy territory. Even though he witnessed the deaths of the other members of his tank unit, Roland appears either unwilling or unable to comprehend the gravity of his situation. Surprisingly, a surplus of warm clothes shields Roland from the elements of a frigid German winter. Cozy and warm as he treks through Germany, he escapes the reality of the true war situation by spinning real events into a fiction reminiscent of a corny Hollywood movie script.

Weary’s version of the true war story went like this: There was a big German attack, and Weary and his antitank buddies fought like hell until everybody was killed but Weary. So it goes. And then Weary tied in with two scouts, and they became close friends immediately, and they decided to fight their way back to their own lines. They were going to travel fast. They were damned if they’d surrender. They shook hands all around. They called themselves “The Three Musketeers.” (52-53)

Later, the reader learns that Weary caused his antitank unit’s demise, so his fictive retelling represents blatant historical revision motivated by an inability (or perhaps a refusal) to process and internalize blame. The narrator carefully reminds the reader that

“the true war story was still going on” while Roland’s daydream unfolded. By pitting a romantic war story against a more authentic combat situation, Vonnegut exposes the absurdity and juvenility of romanticized war stories. Including the details about Roland’s garb suggests that romantic ideas about war can only unfold in cozy environments that are distant from real war experiences.

As the “true” war story develops in Weary’s imagination, two of “The Three Musketeers”<sup>14</sup> abandon Weary to improve their chances of survival. While this simplistic “true” war story represents a humorously memorable, albeit small, part of the narrative, Vonnegut appears to be leveling a biting critique against anyone who might believe stories like Weary’s rendition of *The Three Musketeers*. Since this incident unfolds early in the novel, Vonnegut clearly wastes no time in lampooning this naïve sense of what a true war story is like, presumably to prepare the reader for the more complex versions to follow.

*Slaughterhouse Five* as a whole includes some elements that on the surface seem far more outrageous than Roland’s daydream—time travel, aliens, traveling to distant galaxies, learning how time is perceived in the fourth dimension, etc., yet the narrator asserts in the opening lines of the novel “all this happened, more or less.” Even though he backs down from this claim rather quickly, he frequently reminds the reader that this *is* his “famous book about Dresden” that took him over two decades to write. He explores truth, even though the prospect of absolute truth proves dubious, through a perspective

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<sup>14</sup> Kunze (2012) offers an interesting take on Weary's invocation of the Three Musketeers by claiming that it represents an appropriation of "fictions of noble masculinity" as a type of coping mechanism. He notes that "innocence is feminized, but in a way that privileges the feminine as compassionate, rational, and preferable over the absurd cruelty perpetuated by masculinity."

that surpasses and negates any patriotic sentiment that celebratory war stories might inspire. The plot of the novel contrasts with Weary's "true war story" and postulates an interesting concept: a story containing time travel, alien abductions, alternate dimensions, and so on, more accurately communicates a *true* war story than anything akin to Weary's simple-minded ideals might produce.<sup>15</sup>

O'Brien takes a more direct approach to disabusing war story tropes such as sacrificial heroes, camaraderie in battle, good triumphing over evil, etc. in *The Things They Carried*. Like Vonnegut, he is not opposed to blending genres in his fiction. His chapter, "How to Tell a True War Story" unfolds as part commentary/reflective essay mixed with creative fiction and non-fiction—the lines separating these latter two are often blurred in these "true" war stories. The narrator begins by telling an interesting, if aimless, story about a soldier who writes a letter to the sister of his recently departed war buddy, then interjects with the following commentary:

A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior, nor restrain men from doing the things men have always done. If a story seems moral, do not believe it. If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie. There is no rectitude whatsoever. There is no virtue. As a first rule of thumb, therefore, you can tell a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil. (65 – 66)

This passage reveals a double meaning in the title. Naturally, "how to tell..." suggests that O'Brien writes for other soldiers, instructing them on how to communicate true war stories. The first few pages, however, show that while this audience may be under consideration, O'Brien more directly communicates to non-veterans. O'Brien's chapter

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<sup>15</sup> Section III of this thesis explores this idea in more detail.

functions as an informal guide for “spotting” or “identifying” true war stories—how to “tell” if a war story is true. This becomes abundantly clear a few lines later when he graphically demonstrates the vulgar nature of typical soldier-dialogue, wrought with sexism, racism, and cursing.<sup>16</sup> He then explains, “You can [identify] a true war story if it embarrasses you. If you don’t care for obscenity, you don’t care for the truth; if you don’t care for the truth, watch how you vote” (66). By addressing his audience directly, “O’Brien” implicates his readers by suggesting that if they support war, they have no right to look down on sexist, racist, vulgar dialogue because the readers are complicit in it. O’Brien suggests that most civilians perpetuate war on some level, either through active support via voting and public endorsement, or through passive complicity via indifference and other failures to actively challenge war. In this sense, most people have played a role, however small, in permitting the events that put a soldier in a situation where vulgarity becomes a coping mechanism—a way of engaging a sordid situation. Hiding from this truth makes it possible for civilians to back politicians who will continue the cycle of conflict.

Other characteristics of O’Brien’s true story include a sense of incompleteness—a lack of conflict resolution (72), an ironic sense that the true story cannot be believed (68), and an inclination toward paradox (77). Collectively, O’Brien’s assertions and narrative examples suggest that a true war story is stripped of nearly every quality that one would typically ascribe to a story.

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<sup>16</sup> In this respect, O’Brien illustrates his arguments in this essay on “true” war stories by incorporating the dirty realism found in other veteran authors, like Norman Mailer, who depicts soldier vulgarity in *The Naked and the Dead*.

### Section III – Applying the Ontological Turn to the True War Story

“Even now I can see myself as I was then.”

~Tim O’Brien, *The Things They Carried*~

Vonnegut and O’Brien’s fiction indicates that their war-time experiences produced a new and unique way of perceiving the world, particularly their place/existence in the world. Wrought by the trauma of combat, this worldview differs significantly from the perspectives grounded in a reality that has no direct experience with war. Several critics attempt to explain this difference by reading these novels as artistic depictions of psychological trauma.<sup>17</sup> While this approach certainly holds merit, it may also risk relegating Vonnegut and O’Brien’s war fiction to mere examples of what war can do to a person’s psyche, indirectly encouraging readers who are uninitiated in combat experience to instinctively approach these novels from a presumed state of normality—the assumption being that because combat did not interfere with their mental capacities, the perspectives that they (civilians) bring to the “natural world” hold more value than the perspective of a mentally damaged veteran. This, in turn, leads to a related assumption: the uninitiated readers’ perspective is superior to the veteran perspective, because the latter is tainted by a damaged psyche. No doubt, this inspires sympathy for

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<sup>17</sup> Caciado (2005) bases his argument on Vonnegut’s admission that writing *Slaughterhouse Five* was a “form of therapy.” He cites several sources that address psychological trauma to help illustrate his points. McGinnis’ (1975) reading of *Slaughterhouse Five* suggests that Vonnegut imaginatively invents the “Tralfamadorian lie” of immortality in order to cope with the reality of death, symbolized by the Dresden event. Veas Gulani (2003) argues *Slaughterhouse-Five* should be regarded “as a therapeutic process that allows him to uncover and deal with his trauma in World War II.” She goes on to say, “By using creative means to overcome his distress, Vonnegut makes it possible for us to trace his path to recovery. We slowly narrow in on his condition using the novel as a conduit first to the protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, then to the narrator, and finally to the author himself.” Herble (2001) argues that O’Brien’s work depicts PTSD and other forms of trauma that O’Brien experienced during Vietnam. Some other examples of critics who emphasize the depictions of psychological trauma in these texts include Rolan 2011, Herble 2011, Pederson 2014, Kingstone 1999, Melley 2003, Wicks 2014 and Williams 2009.

veteran authors who apparently struggle to regain a semblance of what felt normal before combat interrupted and abused their psyche, but a true war story, when read effectively, should do much more than invoke the reader's empathy.

Numerous texts published between the mid-1940s to the early 2000s attempt to explain why those who are traumatized by combat struggle to re-assimilate into civilian culture<sup>18</sup>—or to return to normality. Such texts tend to perpetuate an idea that trauma distorts, to some degree, a combat veteran's perception of reality in the form of PTSD and other psychological maladies. Appel and Beebe's 1946 article "Preventive Psychiatry: An Epidemiological Approach" represents one of the earliest examples of this. There, they assert that

There is no such thing as 'getting used to combat' [. . .] Each moment of combat imposes a strain so great that men will break down in direct relation to the intensity and duration of their exposure. Thus psychiatric casualties are as inevitable as gunshot and shrapnel wounds in warfare. (1470, also qtd. in O'Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* 27).

Readers, uninitiated in the combat experience, yet familiar with the idea that war frequently produces "psychiatric casualties," may instinctively approach Vonnegut and O'Brien's works from a presumed state of normality. Veteran perspectives are often subtly "othered" as psychologically broken and, therefore, less reliable when compared to that of the non-veteran majority. Approaching veteran writings through a lens of ontological anthropology challenges this tendency and attempts to negotiate the chasm

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<sup>18</sup> For example, Paul Budra and Michael Zeitlin's *Soldier Talk: The Vietnam War in Oral Narrative* emphasizes this struggle as it attempts, in part, to serve as a handbook for how to read and process "the historical, psychological, and narrative truths" that soldiers possess.

Other examples are represented in O'Brien's 1994 novel, *In the Lake of the Woods*. Throughout the novel he inserts quotes from pop psychology texts, such as Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* and Patience H.C. Mason's *Recovering from the War: A Guide for All Veterans, Family Members, Friends and Therapists*.

between combat veterans' perspective—not just on war, but on life in general and all of its varied meanings and purposes—and the civilian's ability to understand these perspectives.

Both Vonnegut and O'Brien attempt to communicate truth through fiction to an uninitiated audience, even if the purpose and details of that truth prove elusive, vague, and unreliable. Accomplishing this goal with any degree of certainty proves difficult, if not impossible, and both authors communicate this through the voice of the narrator in their novels. Naturally, the reader is left to wonder to what degree s/he is able to comprehend the truths that the authors are trying to communicate. This thesis attempts to navigate this ambiguity by examining Vonnegut and O'Brien's attempts to convey true war stories through a lens of "ontological" discourse. Doing so reframes the dialogic interaction between the reader and these novels through an emphasis on "radical alterity"<sup>19</sup> to the point that telling and reading such stories represent distinct ontological journeys.

At its most basic definition, "ontology" refers to the branch of metaphysics that examines the state of being or existence. Though the concept originates in ancient philosophy (Plato),<sup>20</sup> contemporary academic circles in both the sciences and humanities emphasize it for a variety of purposes.<sup>21</sup> In spite of the variances in approach that emerge across different disciplines, a fundamental interest in exploring questions of being,

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<sup>19</sup> "Radical alterity" refers to the manner in which a person residing in a particular ontology may perceive the perspective of another human being residing a significantly different ontology.

<sup>20</sup> See Heidegger's *Plato's Sophist*. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana UP, 1997.

<sup>21</sup> Alberti notes in "Worlds Otherwise" that this renewed interest in ontology yields numerous descriptors ascribed in various disciplines. These include: "(re)turn to things (Domanska 2006; Henare, Hollbraad, and Wastell 2007; Latour 2004; Olsen 2010; Preda 1999; Trentmann 2009)"; the ontological turn, or the speculative turn; new material feminism; political ontology; symmetrical anthropology and archaeology."

existence, and reality predicates the underlying motivation for each. A contemporary branch of anthropology, often referred to as “Ontological Anthropology,” borrows this concept and uses it as a means for understanding cross-cultural discourse. It advocates seeing disparate cultures as “distinct and incommensurable worlds” by exploring the merit of “reintroducing ideas of radical alterity and essentialism into anthropology” (Vigh and Sausdal 50).

This relatively new approach to cultural studies began in the mid-1980s when the traditional modes of ethnographic and anthropologic approaches came under scrutiny,<sup>22</sup> and it gained considerable traction in the 1990s. Since then, several theorists have attempted to offer a precise definition for “ontology” as it appears in anthropologic theory. Harris and Robb’s 2012 article “Multiple Ontologies and the Problem of the Body in History” defines it as “a fundamental set of understandings about how the world is: what kinds of beings, processes, and qualities could potentially exist and how these relate to each other” (668). They go on to explain that “the ontological critique” emphasizes “the reality of worlds as people understand them.” This applies primarily to cultures that Western observers instinctively deem “other” through an assumption that these cultures hold inferior understandings of the natural world, evidenced by their tendency to believe in things that modern scientific knowledge denies. Alberti, for example, discusses how certain societies believe that humans can take on the form of animals. Rather than assuming that such beliefs are primitive and inferior, he suggests that an emphasis on essentialism helps prevent Westerners from dismissing such worldviews. Harris and Robb explain the impact of this approach:

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<sup>22</sup> See *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*—a collection of essays on this topic edited by James Clifford and George E. Marcus.



The natives still saw the world as natives, but we realized that we are natives, too; our judgment about what is “real” or “natural” involves our own ontological categorizations. The associated anthropological emphasis on multinaturalism, personhood, alterity, ontology, and symmetry has undermined confidence in previously widely accepted categories of thought.<sup>23</sup> (668)

This emphasis on multinaturalism, personhood, alterity, etc. relates to Viveros de Castro’s work in Amerindian perspectivism, which also attempts to fundamentally alter the way one perceives cultural difference by acknowledging multiple realities. Sometimes referred to as ‘the ontological turn,’ this theory proposes that when alterity is observed in people groups—cultural perspectives, beliefs, ideas, etc.—the difference should “not be understood as merely culturally or socially differentiated from one another, but also different-in-being; not alter as in alternative but as in radical alter – ontologically different in core and kind” (Vigh and Sausdal 50). This necessitates what Vigh and Sausdal call “a ‘multi-realist’ perspective” as it affords a “possibility of understanding otherness without privileging an occidental (‘Euro-American’ ontological perspective” (53). Ontological anthropologists believe that this approach may open new doors for cross-cultural discourse that are inhibited by more traditional, epistemological methodologies,<sup>24</sup> which assume that an objective, universal reality exists and different cultures hold varied perspectives on that universal reality.

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<sup>23</sup> They cite a variety of publications: Alberti and Marshall 2009; Alberti et al 2011; Borić2005; Conneller 2004; Fowler 2004; Henare et al. 2007a; Henare et al. 2007b; Holbraad 2009; Latour 2004; Strathern 1992a; Vilac,a2005; Viveiros de Castro 2004; Webmoor 2007; Webmoor and Witmore 2008; Witmore 2007

<sup>24</sup> In order to distinguish the ontological approach from the epistemological bias, terms like “ontological” or “ontology” will be used in place of other descriptors (such as “way of viewing the world”) in this thesis. The ontological turn emphasizes a plurality of realities whereas an epistemological approach assumes that there exists one reality with multiple ways of understanding that reality—some of which are more accurate than others.

Recognizing “multiple realities” helps prevent outsiders from assuming that their unique ways of perceiving the world are more informed, accurate, or correct by suspending biases against things that they perceive as irrational or superstitious. While to some this may seem erroneous (i.e. some educated people in developed countries may have a hard time giving credence to the notion that there are some places on the globe where people are able to shape-shift), it can be argued that failing to value unique ontologies has resulted in a failure to understand—even the eradication of—many cultures, belief systems, and languages.<sup>25</sup> According to Alberti, the ontological approach’s emphasis on being and reality distinguishes itself from “the epistemological foundations of the culture concept” and attempts to convey a higher level of respect for “the other” that is not necessarily inherent in an epistemological approach (905). So, in order to distinguish the ontological approach from the epistemological bias, terms like “ontological” or “ontology” will be used in place of other descriptors (such as “way of viewing the world”) in this thesis.

What Alberti has to say next about this ontological turn is of particular importance for understanding Vonnegut and O’Brien’s true war stories: “once a relational ontology has been introduced, then by its very nature it challenges any attempt to erect barriers between something that can be called the real, material, or physical world and something else that can be called thought, discourse, or narrative” (905). This relational ontology as it pertains to understanding and valuing cultural difference allows the reader

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<sup>25</sup> Brief examples of this include:

- 1) Rome’s conquests during the Gaelic Wars during the first century BCE resulted in the extinction of the Celtic culture and religion.
- 2) Westward expansion in the U.S. and notions of Manifest Destiny gave white imperialists license to subjugate, displace and at times eradicate whole tribes and nations of Native Americans.
- 3) Diego de Landa, a Franciscan Friar attempted to “cleans” the Mayans by eradicating every semblance of their religion and culture (Basbanes 120 – 123).

to better navigate the liminal space between the perspective that the true war story attempts to convey and the reader's ability to comprehend that perspective. Part of the difficulty in bridging this gap involves a problem of belief. Certain things may be believable in a particular ontological context and entirely outlandish in another. O'Brien alludes to this in "How to Tell a True War Story."

In many cases a true war story cannot be believed. If you believe it, be skeptical. It's a question of credibility. Often the crazy stuff is true and the normal stuff isn't, because the normal stuff is necessary to make you believe the truly incredible craziness. (68)

O'Brien suggests that if a non-veteran believes a war story, there is a good chance that the war story has been adapted to fit the belief system of the non-veteran's ontological context. Too much gets lost in translation for such a story to be reliable. Yet, O'Brien also appears to understand that a certain degree of negotiation is necessary in order for a war story to reach its intended audience. In "Speaking of Courage," for example, "O'Brien"<sup>26</sup> recalls imagining how he might recount the insanity of a specific battle to people who never experienced combat. Beginning with "Late in the night [. . .] we took some mortar fire," he then delves into precise detail of the way he perceived the event:

He would've explained how it was still raining, and how the clouds were pasted to the field, and how the mortar rounds seemed to come right out of the clouds. Everything was black and wet. The field just exploded. Rain and slop and shrapnel, nowhere to run, and all they could do was worm down into slime and cover up and wait. He would've described the crazy things he saw. Unnatural things. Like how at one point he noticed a guy lying next to him in the sludge, completely buried except for his face, and how after a moment the guy rolled his eyes and winked at him. The noise was fierce. Heavy thunder, and mortar rounds, and people yelling. Some of the men began shooting up flares. Red and green and silver flares, all colors, and the rain came down in Technicolor. The field was boiling. The

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<sup>26</sup> Vonnegut inserts himself into the narrative of *Slaughterhouse Five*; O'Brien does the same in *The Things They Carried*. In order to distinguish between the authors and the characters that appear in these narratives, I put the character names in quotation marks.

shells made deep slushy craters, opening up all those years of waste, centuries' worth, and the smell came bubbling out of the earth. (141 -142).

Many readers may find aspects of this description incredible. Clouds, obviously, are comprised of vapor so they could not possibly “paste” to the earth. On the same note smells do not “bubble.” For most, these descriptors exemplify a well-known literary device—metaphor. Other aspects of the situation are easily explained: the technicolor rain is merely the result of water reflecting light from multi-colored flares. Instinctively, a reader who lacks combat experience might dismiss the “craziness” of this passage by interpreting it as mere artistic license, which is why O’Brien emphasizes how unnatural this event was. From his perspective, it defies rational explanation. His interest lies not in cleverly describing a battle but in depicting insanity in a manner that the reader can process. He encourages his readers to resist the temptation to dismiss it as mere literary fluff by insisting that the seemingly normal aspects of such a narrative are included to help the reader “believe the truly incredible craziness” (68).

Most readers instinctively affirm the binary oppositional categories described in the above passage—wet /dry, vapor/solid, land /sky, self /outside world, life/death—as essential characteristics of the natural world. O’Brien’s fiction, however, reveals that combat destabilizes such assumptions, which results in an altered reality. Complicating these basic categories seems irrational to the uninitiated. O’Brien anticipates this and encourages his readers to suspend disbelief and embrace the implausible. For him, the combat experience blurs the line between many assumed binaries, which leads him to doubt their authenticity. This in turn, causes him to challenge other essential categories in other situations, resulting in a different ontology. In encouraging readers to expand their perspective on reality, O’Brien’s work calls for an ontological interpretation, since his

work explicitly challenges the reader's temptation "to erect barriers between something that can be called the real, material, or physical world" (Alberti 905).

Both Vonnegut and O'Brien appear to be preoccupied with the disconnect between uninitiated readers and the combat veterans perspective in their novels, signifying a lack of confidence in both their ability to communicate. Yet, in spite of this uncertainty, both persevere in their attempt to bridge this chasm through their fiction. Applying the "ontological turn" reveals that the authors' communication struggles result from an attempt to negotiate two disparate ontologies—an ontology of those oriented to first-hand combat experience (post-war ontology) and an ontology of those who have no direct combat experience (pre-war/non-veteran ontology).

Because of this rift between civilian and veteran ontologies that O'Brien and Vonnegut depict in their true war stories, first-time readers may find it hard to appreciate the non-linear plot structures and understand the purpose for the seemingly outrageous elements that are present in these novels. Vonnegut's combination of science fiction, war fiction, and (pseudo)autobiography in *Slaughterhouse Five* can be disorienting for a reader accustomed to more traditional novel formats. While O'Brien avoids science fiction, he also blends genres of fantasy and imaginative fiction with realistic war stories in *Going After Cacciato*. *The Things They Carried* mimics the internal chaos of remembrance that exists in the mind of the author through a blend of reflective essays, fiction, and autobiography. Each of these three novels employs a complex amalgamation of genres and non-linear plot structures that represents an attempt to accurately convey the war experience. Both Vonnegut and O'Brien attempt to communicate the ineffable. For them, war is more than an event; it is an entity, a form of existence, and a catalyst

that alters the ontology of its participants. Since both experienced war in radically different contexts,<sup>27</sup> the similarities in their perspective on war and life after war warrant consideration. Both find writing to the generally uninitiated, American public about their war experiences incredibly difficult. They both believe that they hold some form of inherent truth that needs to be communicated to a wide audience, yet negotiating that truth into print results in a decades-long struggle.

The narrators of Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* and O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* explicitly communicate this difficulty. In *Slaughterhouse*, the speaker explains that it took Vonnegut nearly twenty years to finish his "famous book about Dresden" (23), and the opening chapter describes the prolonged endeavor. Vonnegut planned to write about his experience as a POW in Dresden when he returned from the war and expected it to be an easy project since he would just have to report what he had seen (2). Under the influence of misplaced optimism, the challenges of communicating across this ontological divide caught him by surprise. He persisted only because the impulse to write about it never relented. Though he does not describe the writing process in extensive detail, he acknowledges in the opening chapter that the effort cost significant money, anxiety, and time (2). He also briefly recounts several life events and vocations. At each incident, he mentions that he was working on this book, which establishes the continuity of his decades-long effort. Including this type of overview in the first chapter of a novel,

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<sup>27</sup> Vonnegut enlisted in the army during WWII; O'Brien was drafted into Vietnam. Vonnegut fought primarily in cold climates; O'Brien fought in the heat of the jungle. History ascribes a great purpose to America's Allied involvement in WWII—the defeat of the Nazis, who are often equated with absolute evil; the American public widely regards Vietnam as a quagmire that lacked definite purpose. Vonnegut was a POW who witnessed a civilian massacre at the hands of the Allies during the Dresden bombing; O'Brien returned to Vietnam after the war and became acquainted with the people that he and his men dehumanized during the war. After his trip, he remarked "My God. We should have bombed these people with love." ("The Vietnam in Me")

rather than in an introduction, is certainly anomalous. So too is the assessment of his overall work when he brings the first chapter to a close:

[*Slaughterhouse Five*] is so short and jumbled and jangled, Sam, because there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre. Everybody is supposed to be dead, to never say anything or want anything ever again. Everything is supposed to be very quiet after a massacre, and it always is, except for the birds. (24)

In Vonnegut's reality, his own existence parallels the anomaly of the narrator's autobiographical interjections in the opening chapter. He survived the massacre at Dresden—an event that no one should have survived. In Vonnegut's mind, his own life, and particularly his opportunity to write about the massacre, stands apart from the natural order of things, and he reflects this in the way that he chooses to structure the novel. By surviving an event that attempted to annihilate not only the existence of many lives, but also key aspects of an entire culture,<sup>28</sup> he possesses a perspective on war's carnage and waste that most readers can only imagine. The lines between certain binaries that help most people make sense of the world become blurred as a result of this experience. Articulating an experience that forced Vonnegut to rethink his understandings of the alive/dead binary—what should and should not exist after a bombing—renders an ontological perspective that struggles to communicate with a perspective that lacks these experiences. For Vonnegut, the post-combat ontology renders traditional modes of storytelling inadequate mediums for conveying this perspective. A traditional novel, comprised of plot climaxes, character development, linear narrative and a heroic protagonist, will not suffice.

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<sup>28</sup>Dresden functioned as a cultural center for Germany, boasting unique and architectural achievements, museums, and libraries. During the war, civilians flocked to Dresden because it lacked military significance, and they believed that it would not be bombed. (Addison and Crang 2006)

Vonnegut hints at this later in the narrative during the aforementioned incident where Valencia makes a post-coital inquiry about Billy's war experiences. She wants a war story, but Billy declines, remarking that "[i]t would sound like a dream." [. . . ] "Other people's dreams aren't very interesting, usually" (156). Here, Billy echoes Vonnegut's struggles to recount his war experiences by ascribing them to the dream world where infinite absurdities exist. This incident, combined with key aspects from the first chapter, supports the idea that combat experience produces a distinct ontology. Trauma can fundamentally alter one's way of being in the world, resulting in a mode of alterity that is long-lasting, if not permanent. By briefly detailing his struggle to write this novel and conceding that the final product culminates in a necessary failure, Vonnegut demonstrates the ineffability of many aspects of his war experience, which contains no plot climaxes and no definite conclusions. While all of that can be easily stated, articulating it in a way that resonates beyond superficial observation—a mere information dump—proves much more difficult.

O'Brien experienced similar challenges in his writing. Like Vonnegut, it took O'Brien nearly two decades to fictionalize his war experiences in *The Things They Carried*, and he, again like Vonnegut, articulates that struggle directly in the narrative. In the first chapter of *Slaughterhouse Five*, Vonnegut recounts a visit to an old war buddy in hopes that an evening of collaborative recollection would help him break through a perpetual state of writer's block; Tim O'Brien does the same in the second chapter of his novel, when he recounts a visit from Lt. Jimmy Cross years after the war. While both



conversations yield trivial memories—old jokes and idiosyncratic anecdotes—,<sup>29</sup> neither produces the sought-after breakthrough. O’Brien, echoing Vonnegut, discusses this challenge as well as his uncertainty in the efficacy of the final product. At one point, he opines:

I’m forty-three years old, and a writer now, and the war has been over for a long while. Much of it is hard to remember. I sit at this typewriter and stare through my words and watch Kiowa sinking into the deep muck of a shit field, or Curt Lemon hanging in pieces from a tree, and as I write about these things, the remembering is turned into a kind of rehappening. Kiowa yells at me. Curt Lemon steps from the shade into bright sunlight, his face brown and shining, and then he soars into a tree. The bad stuff never stops happening: it lives in its own dimension, replaying itself over and over. (O’Brien, TTC 31).

In stating that this narrative of recollection exists “in its own dimension,” O’Brien communicates that the line between yet another binary—past/present—becomes blurred. This calls to mind Billy Pilgrim’s insistence that his war stories are like dreams that no one would find interesting. Often, dreams appear to make sense until one tries to recount them to another individual. Unlike dreams, however, the traumatic events from O’Brien’s past are not easily forgotten. They play through his mind continuously not as mere recollections but as “rehappening[s].” In this respect, O’Brien becomes unstuck in time just as Billy Pilgrim frequently becomes unstuck in time, and the idea that the bad stuff “keeps happening” affirms an idea Vonnegut introduces in *Slaughterhouse Five* via the Tralfamadorians—an alien race that is able to perceive reality in the fourth dimension. These aliens observe the past, present, and future simultaneously, and they explain to Billy that the idea that the present annihilates the past and relegates it to the realm of

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<sup>29</sup> Vonnegut and O’Hare recall transporting a drunken POW in a wheelbarrow (*Slaughterhouse Five* 17). O’Brien and Jimmy Cross laugh as they recall a soldier wearing his girlfriend’s pantyhose like a talisman (*The Things They Carried* 27).

memory is incorrect. What happens in the past continues to happen forever. By complicating the past/present binary, albeit through different angles, both authors continue to suggest that their fiction attempts to communicate from a different ontological context than that of their primary reading audience, which takes this binary for granted.

O'Brien's post-war reality questions his previously-assumed binaries concerning life/death, past/present, fiction/reality. It also communicates a new perspective on the role that narrative can play in the lives of the living as well as the dead. He alludes to this in the title of a chapter, "The Lives of the Dead," which opens with an intriguing perspective on death:

But this too is true: stories can save us. I'm forty-three years old, and a writer now, and even still, right here, I keep dreaming Linda alive. And Ted Lavender, too, and Kiowa, and Curt Lemon, and a slim young man I killed, and an old man sprawled beside a pigpen, and several others whose bodies I once lifted and dumped into a truck. They're all dead. But in a story, which is a kind of dreaming, the dead sometimes smile and sit up and return to the world. (*TTC* 213)

Earlier in the novel, O'Brien tells a story about Linda, a childhood friend who, at a young age, died of cancer. The deaths of O'Brien's war buddies—Lavender, Kiowa, and Lemon—surface in various chapters. O'Brien also crafts an imaginative life story of the "slim young [Vietnamese] man" that he killed. Having already provided the details of these stories for the reader, O'Brien uses this passage to reinforce the idea that the act of remembering, in a post-combat ontology, blurs the line between the past/present binary. "Remembering" and "rehashing" (31) are, in some respects, synonymous. Again, this aligns with an idea that Vonnegut offers in *Slaughterhouse Five* through the fourth-dimensional Tralfamadorians, who perceive the past, present, and future simultaneously.

By equating narrative with salvation, O'Brien also alludes to the complication of the alive/dead binary that appears in his post-war worldview. Prior to war, O'Brien took the alive/dead binary for granted, and he conveys this in "On the Rainy River." He recalls his anger at receiving the draft notice: "It seemed to me that when a nation goes to war it must have reasonable confidence in the justice and imperative of its cause. You can't fix your mistakes. **Once people are dead, you can't make them undead**" [emphasis added] (38-39). Yet, much of the novel, according to what he communicates in "Lives of the Dead" attempts to counter this idea. While his fiction reveals no concrete religious affinity, the idea that narrative "can save us" by "dreaming [people] alive" hints at a form of afterlife that takes place not in an alternate dimension, such as Heaven or Hell, but in the minds of those who remember the dead.

O'Brien continues to complicate the readers' assumed ontological categories in a short chapter titled "Good Form." There, he confesses that most of what he has written was contrived, yet his goal is not merely to tell a good story. He claims, "[This book is] not a game. It's a form. Right here, now, as I invent myself, I'm thinking of all I want to tell you about why this book is written as it is. [. . .] I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth" (171). This distinction complicates the fact/fiction binary in the sense that O'Brien anticipates that most readers will instinctively equate truth with fact and fabrication with fiction, and he asks the audience to rethink those assumptions. This calls to mind an earlier passage from "How to Tell a True War Story."

In any war story, but especially a true one, it's difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen. What seems to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way. The angles of vision are skewed. [. . .] When a guy dies, like Curt Lemon, you look away and then

look back for a moment and then look away again. 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. (67-68)

In other words, a “true” war story distorts the fact/fiction and actuality/“seemingness” categories. The act of “looking away”—presumably in response to feeling overwhelmed by the magnitude of the experience—produces gaps between what happened and what “seemed to happen.” Later, these gaps contribute to the apparent falsity of the retrospective war stories. By communicating that he continually questions his own recollections before ever attempting to convey them to others, O’Brien establishes an important precedent: the truth of a war story lies not in its accurate recounting of essential details in sequential order. Rather, truth comes through respecting the chaos and uncertainty of remembrance and articulating it as such.

Analyzing these stories through a lens of ontological anthropology, which affirms multiple realities, encourages the reader to approach the novel, not from a presumed state of normality, but from an assumption that both the reader and the author exist in different, yet equally valid, states of reality. The reader then (in theory) becomes more receptive of the ideas that O’Brien and Vonnegut attempt to communicate, which, ideally for the authors, results in avid cultural resistance to war. Naturally, this entails a degree of negotiation between the reader and the author. In their fiction, both Vonnegut and O’Brien take the time to articulate the ineffability of truth formed by trauma, so the very fact that they attempt to communicate this truth in writing exposes a conundrum: any attempt to force the truth of a combat experience into the confines of traditional narrative structure risks compromising the authenticity of the perspective that they try to convey.

Clear binaries, rooted in a pre-war ontology, comprise many aspects of a traditional narrative: protagonist/antagonist, autobiography/fiction, historical fact/historical fiction, and so on. Since the post-war ontology questions the validity of these binaries, only a semblance of the actual truth can be expected to make its way on to the page as a result of this negotiation. Adapting the true war story to fit a particular genre represents yet another level of compromise, which helps explain the non-normative narrative techniques. For these authors, real war simply does not fit into the narrative framework of *The Three Musketeers* and other romantic celebrations of war because the plot structures ascribe a sense of purpose or accomplishment to combat.

The structure of Vonnegut's war novel emphasizes the alterity of the post-war ontology by employing a flat, passive protagonist—an antihero whose perception of time radically differs from most readers. The amalgamation of genres and non-chronological episodes in that text alerts the reader to the idea that a radically different ontology exists as a result of combat trauma. By satirizing war clichés through characters like Valencia and Roland Weary, he communicates that those who have not experienced combat first-hand are susceptible to oversimplified understandings of the nature of war. In this respect, his novel alerts readers to an altered ontology.

While Vonnegut's work hints at the ontological difference between combat veterans and non-veterans, O'Brien's work explicates the differences. His approach in *The Things They Carried* attempts to help the reader bridge the gap between the pre-war ontology and the new ontology informed by combat experience. O'Brien's novel is similar to Vonnegut's in the sense that he fictionalizes his war experience through a blending of genres and episodic micronarratives, but he also includes reflective

commentaries in his stories in an attempt to help the reader understand his perspective—to navigate the ontological divide. For example, he frames part of the fourth chapter, “On the Rainy River” with allusions to a universal grieving process frequently referenced in American popular psychology. He begins by contextualizing this allusion with a confession.

This is one story I’ve never told before. Not to anyone. [. . . ] To go into it, I’ve always thought, would only cause embarrassment for all of us, a sudden need to be elsewhere, which is the natural response to a confession. Even now, I’ll admit, the story makes me squirm. (36)

For over two decades, this particular story has haunted him more than any other. Ashamed, he finds that ignoring it and hoping that it will fade into the recesses of his memory are ineffective coping mechanisms. Telling it represents a new way to contend with the guilt. He explains, “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. Still, it’s a hard story to tell.” (37)

This ominous preamble solicits anticipation. It establishes an expectation for something horrible—a gruesome war story, perhaps involving the slaughter of children, rape, or something equally sordid. What follows is actually a story about how a young “O’Brien” almost fled to Canada rather than going to Vietnam. The source of his shame lies not in the fact that he considered dodging the draft but that he lacked the courage to refuse to participate in a war that he knew was morally wrong. One of his objectives in communicating this story makes the writing particularly difficult. O’Brien wants the reader to experience the anxiety that he felt as a scared twenty-one-year-old kid who just received word that his life plans must be placed on hold (54), because he “was drafted to fight a war [he] hated” (38). Never mind the fact that the government failed to provide a

sufficient rationale for the war or clearly define the objectives for the conflict. Never mind O'Brien's opinion on the matter—"certain blood was being shed for uncertain reasons," and one should not "make war without knowing why" (38). Though detailing the injustices of O'Brien's plight is rather easy, immersing the reader in the helpless anxiety that he felt proves difficult. Yet, O'Brien's attempt to bridge the gap between two distinct ontologies necessitates this type of immersion. To accomplish this, he subtly establishes some common ground between non-veteran readers and his perspective by crafting the story as a near-textbook example of the Kübler-Ross model for grief. This model originally appeared in the 1969 pop psychology book *On Death and Dying*, and by the time O'Brien's novel was published in the early 1990s, the "Five Stages of Grief"<sup>30</sup> outlined in this text were well-known.

"On the Rainy River" tells the story of a catalyst—a draft notice received on June 17, 1968—that radically interrupts "O'Brien's" life. He describes the initial shock, feeling "the blood go thick behind [his] eyes" and hearing the absence of sound—a "silent howl" in his head (39). Immediately, "O'Brien" slips into denial—Kübler-Ross' first stage of grief, declaring that he "was too good for this war. Too smart, too compassionate, too everything" (39). His internal monologue persists "it couldn't happen. I was above it. I had the world dicked" as his mind rifles through his academic accomplishments and the bright prospects of his future. He concludes that the news must be "a mistake," possibly "a foul-up in the paperwork" (39). Rationalization then morphs into another stage of grief—negotiation. In young "O'Brien's" mind there are plenty of "back-to-the-stone-age hawk[s]" that have no qualms with war, plenty of people that do

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<sup>30</sup> These stages include 1) denial and isolation, 2) anger, 3) bargaining, 4) depression, and 5) acceptance. O'Brien's story appears to flip stages two and three, but all stages are represented on some level.

not have his bright future—a full ride to Harvard. Why not draft them? When bargaining and rationalization proves futile, he moves to another grieving stage—anger. He recalls the “rage in [his] stomach” (40). Declaring, with disdain, that a just law would require people who support the war, thinking “it’s worth the price,” to participate. They should be the ones putting “their own precious fluids on the line” and spilling the blood (40). Advocates for war should be on the frontlines, along with their families and loved ones, because risking the lives of *others* for a cause that *they* deem worthy is contemptible. As his wrath eventually subsides over the next few days, depression (the fourth stage) takes over. “O’Brien” writes, “later [rage] burned down to a smoldering self-pity, then to numbness” (40). He then recounts how he passed the summer in relative solitude, working in a meatpacking plant and occasionally borrowing his dad’s car to embark on long lonely rides so that he could wallow in self-pity (42). He continues in this manner until an emotional breakdown prompts him to leave home and spend a week on the Rainy River, where he enters the final stage of grief—acceptance. He submits to the government, and goes to war.

The stages of mourning and grief outlined in Kübler-Ross’ text remain well known and widely accepted. Some even contend that the process is “universal and [...] experienced by people from all walks of life” (Axelrod 2015). O’Brien’s demonstration of this model throughout the first part of the story helps readers identify with his experience. By likening his shock at receiving a draft notice to learning that one has a potentially terminal illness, O’Brien expands his sphere of communication. It forces the reader to rethink the impact of a draft notice. For the recipients, it functions as more than



a legal document that demands a perfunctory civic obligation akin to jury duty; it is a warrant that mandates enslavement and possibly death.

Another instance where O'Brien attempts to negotiate the differences between his combat-initiated ontology and the reader's occurs a few chapters later in "The Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong." There, he engages the audience's cultural assumptions about gender to illustrate the unnatural transformation that war imposes on its participants. O'Brien begins the story by once again alluding to the cross-ontological problem of belief: "Vietnam was full of strange stories, some improbable, some well beyond that, but the stories that will last forever are those that swirl back and forth across the border between trivia and bedlam, the mad and the mundane" (85). "O'Brien" goes on to explain that he originally heard this story from another soldier who had a reputation for exaggeration, but the soldier's intent was not to deceive. In fact, his objective "was just the opposite: he wanted to heat up the truth" (85). These preliminary details are important. They announce that a crazy story will follow, but the seeming embellishments are there to accentuate a truth that would probably be overlooked in a more factual story. This set-up helps prepare the reader to receive some ideas that might instinctively conflict with their ontological perceptions.

"O'Brien" then begins a second-hand account of the ontological transition of Mary Anne Bell—the girlfriend of Mark Fossie, a medic who works on a base in Vietnam. Mark's position keeps him immune from experiencing combat directly. He remains on the base—a relatively safe environment—and treats wounded soldiers returning from guerilla combat in the jungle. He finagles a way to bring Mary Anne, recently graduated from high school, to the base. She arrives in Vietnam as a typical,

seventeen-year-old-girl who exhibits a mildly flirtatious confidence and a curiosity to learn more about the details of war (89-91). Her inquisitiveness and overall perspective reflects a pre-war ontology, demonstrated in the way that she remains attached to Mark. They spend a lot of time fawning over each other and discussing plans to get married. The narrator likens her overall demeanor to that of “a cheerleader visiting the opposing team’s locker room” (92). Her presence amuses the other soldiers, and she surprises them with her tenacity as she quickly learns how to treat basic wounds.

Not long after her arrival, she begins to assert her independence, spending time exploring the surrounding area, which is mostly under VC control. When cautioned, she heedlessly muses that “it can’t be that bad [...] They’re human beings [...] like everybody else” (92). At this point, the narrator hints at the overall point to this story when he interrupts the narrative to offer a clarification: though Mary Anne was at times whimsical, silly, and bubbly, she was also intelligent. She simply stood out because she was new to Vietnam. The only real difference was her gender, and that difference “didn’t amount to jack.” He explains, “when we first got here—all of us—we were real young and innocent, full of romantic bullshit, but we learned pretty damn quick. And so did Mary Anne” (93). In short, the story-teller believes that Mary Anne’s story typifies most soldiers’ initiation into war.

In the ensuing weeks, Mary Anne continues to change. She helps treat wounds with alacrity, more than willing to “get her hands bloody” (93). She also adapts to the culture of the bush—no longer bothering with cosmetics or hygiene. Instead, she spends her time learning to clean and load assault rifles, set trip flares, and so on. Spending less and less time with Mark, she hints that her plans for the future—marriage, children,

etc.—are not as definite as they were when she arrived. The narrator also points out that “there was a new confidence in her voice, a new authority in the way she carried herself. In many ways she remained naïve and immature, still a kid,” but her high school days “seemed very far away” (94). Mark also perceives that a transformation is taking place—“her body seemed foreign somehow—too stiff in places, too firm where the softness used to be. The bubbiness was gone” (94-95).

This noticeable hardening of personality and physicality points to a shift in Mary Anne’s state of existence and is analogous to what many soldiers experience. She arrived in Vietnam as a dutiful girlfriend—coming at the request of her boyfriend. Yet, she demonstrates excitement for adventure in a new place, far from home. Similarly, all of the soldiers in Vietnam come at the request of someone—a culture that taught them that war is exciting and honorable, a draft notice, etc.—and whenever they arrive, they cling to the familiar until experience grants them a level of autonomy. Mary Anne eventually expresses this autonomy by progressively staying out later and later at night until she eventually stays out *all* night. It bothers Mark, and he suspects that she may be sleeping with other men. In reality, she simply wanted to test her newfound knowledge of war by joining “the Greenies”—elite combat soldiers— on ambush.

This continues until Mark demands that she stay in camp. They get engaged, and Mary Anne tries to resume the role of the dutiful girlfriend that came so naturally to her a few weeks before. She goes through the motions of eating, sleeping, and discussing the future with Mark, but there is something completely disingenuous about the entire thing. Mary Anne, at the precipice of a fundamental change, simply does not fit the mold of her pre-combat ontology. She endures playing this charade with Mark until he tries to send

her back to the states—a prospect that makes her restless. The narrator explains, “it was if she had come up on the edge of something, as if she were caught in that no-man’s-land between [her high school] and deep jungle. Seventeen years old. Just a child, blond and innocent, but then weren’t they all?” (100).

In the end, Mary Anne refuses to go home. She absconds with the Greenies and spends weeks away from camp on ambush. When the unit finally returns, Mark visits their cabin. Outside, he hears Mary Anne’s voice. She sings an unintelligible, primitive song. Eventually, he forces his way into the cabin and is met with a complex, overpowering stench of incense, decaying body parts, filth, etc. When he sees Mary, she surprisingly looks very similar to the girl who arrived in Vietnam—barefoot, wearing a pink sweater and a white skirt. Yet, her eyes reveal that she has undergone a radical change: “utterly flat and indifferent. There was no emotion in her stare, no sense of the person behind it (105). He then notices her jewelry. Mary Anne wears a necklace of human tongues. She tries to explain to Mark, “I know what you think, but it’s not...it’s not *bad*” (106). Mark, bewildered by what he sees, struggles to respond. Then Mary Anne tells him softly “You’re in a place [...] where you don’t belong. [...] You just don’t know. You hide behind this fortress of wire and sandbags, and you don’t know” (106).

Unlike Mark, Mary Anne has been initiated in the combat experience, and this initiation complicates culturally assumed binaries of male/female, good/bad, right/wrong, and even war/love. After her initiation, Mark tries to force her compliance in the role that he expects her to play, but she finds it impossible. She leaves that place and returns to the war. Later, when Mark visits her on her turf—the Greenies’ cabin—and she tells him that he does not belong, it is clear that they have reached an ontological impasse. Having

once, recently, resided in Mark's cultural ontological context, Mary Anne is able to better understand that an ineffable change transpired and that things will never be the same again. She goes from affirming the humanity of members of the VC to adorning her neck with their tongues, while at the same time insisting "it's not *bad*." Mark confronts her in a state of radical alterity, not unlike the state that many girlfriends and wives encounter when their partners return from war. Many combat veterans undergo an ontological transformation that proves difficult for the uninitiated to understand. The aforementioned pop psychology texts<sup>31</sup> that attempt to help loved ones interact with returning combat vets reveals that this is a wide-spread cultural issue. O'Brien seems intent on reminding readers that even though something is ubiquitous (e.g. even though "psychiatric casualties are as inevitable as gunshot and shrapnel wounds in war"<sup>32</sup>), it remains unnatural and fundamentally wrong. He plays with that idea in this story.

Interestingly, O'Brien acknowledges cultural assumptions concerning gender roles in "The Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" and appears to critique the sexist implications of these assumptions—women are fragile, submissive, nonviolent, etc. The story's narrator, Rat, appears to hold conflicting views on the matter. He criticizes his audience for having "blinders on" when it comes to women in one breath and then refers to women as "pussies" in the next:

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<sup>31</sup> Examples include Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* and Patience H.C. Mason's *Recovering from the War: A Guide for All Veterans, Family Members, Friends and Therapists*. Such pop psychology texts attempt to help families and friends reacquaint returning vets with societal norms.

Paul Budra and Michael Zeitlin's *Soldier Talk: The Vietnam War in Oral Narrative* also emphasizes this struggle as it attempts, in part, to serve as a handbook for how to read and process "the historical, psychological, and narrative truths" that soldiers possess.

<sup>32</sup> Appel, John, and Gilbert Beebe. "Preventive Psychiatry: An Epidemiological Approach." *JAMA* 131.18 (1946): 1469-1475.

See what I mean? You got these blinders on about women. How gentle and peaceful they are. All that crap about how if we had a pussy for president there wouldn't be no more wars. Pure garbage. You got to get rid of that sexist attitude.” (102)

The narrator shows that he feels that his progressive views on women surpass those of his audience, but at the same time he uses derogatory terms to describe women. This suggests that various forms of sexism remain ubiquitous in American culture. Perhaps one could safely assume that most readers instinctively refrain from using offensive terms, like “pussy” and other slang terms for the female anatomy, to describe women. Yet, those who are offended by such terms, affirm gender roles that appear “normative” in American culture.

The story's original narrator, Rat, cannot resist inserting his own commentary throughout the narrative—a technique that mimics the fictional O'Brien's narrative approach throughout *The Things They Carried*.

I was right there, I saw those eyes of hers, I saw how she wasn't even the same person no more. What's so impossible about that? She was a girl, that's all. I mean, if it was a guy, everybody'd say, “Hey, no big deal, he got caught up in the Nam shit, he got seduced by the Greenies.” See what I mean? You got these blinders on about women. How gentle and peaceful they are. [...] You got to get rid of that sexist attitude. (102)

O'Brien crafts the story in such a way that it continually points out that this is more than just an outlandish story about a young girl. This sort of change—loss of innocence—frequently occurs in boys that go to war and no one seems to care. In fact, some cultural assumptions might indicate that such changes are natural and necessary—girls are supposed to be innocent; guys are supposed to be tough. By describing how this initiation plays out in a girl, rather than a boy, O'Brien calls for his reading audience to rethink their assumptions about war's normality. This strategy intentionally engages sexist

attitudes that still manifest in American culture, because he believes this kind of story will not resonate with most readers if it discusses the change in a guy. The fact that it happens to a girl grabs the readers' attention. The change seems more unnatural and perverse because of the gender roles that society tends to ascribe to women. O'Brien leverages this to his advantage as he illustrates what happens to kids when they go to war. In order to negotiate the ontological divide between his perspective and that of his uninitiated readers, O'Brien transforms the ubiquitous into the unique. He takes something that appears common—the hardening of a soldier's psyche in response to combat—and complicates it by describing the ontological transition of a seventeen-year-old girl, fresh out of high school, hoping that most readers will pay closer attention to the story because of the cultural assumptions attached to gender.

Mary Anne's story, along with the various other examples mentioned in this section of the thesis, demonstrate a similar purpose and similar challenges to communicating the true war story in the war fiction of Vonnegut and O'Brien. Approaching their novels through a lens of ontological anthropology reveals that in order for the true war story to effectively serve as a bridge between distinct ontologies, negotiation and compromise cannot be relegated solely to the role of the teller. It obliges readers to participate in the negotiation by acknowledging the limits of their perspective and looking beyond their biases. Readers must suspend preconceived notions about war or be prepared to have those notions accosted. A degree of self-awareness, knowing the limitations of one's perspective in a given context—in other words, a recognition of one's own ontology—makes this possible. Acknowledging the unique context of Vonnegut and O'Brien (and other veteran authors) by employing Viveiros de Castro's aforementioned

theory of perspectivism, prompts readers to surpass the peculiarities of these tales—viewing them as “other” or dismissing them as mere fiction—and re-examine their own worldviews.



#### **Section IV—The True War Story and Assaulted Youth**

“Seventeen years old. Just a child, blond and innocent, but then weren’t they all?”

~Tim O’Brien, *The Things They Carried*~

Section III of this thesis establishes a case that both Vonnegut and O’Brien use fiction to communicate across an ontological divide and inform the civilian understanding of what war is, its residual effects, and its varied meanings and purposes. Their fiction can be viewed as rhetorical argument, claiming that combat experience complicates many culturally assumed binaries and reveals new ontological categories. This section explores one specific example of such categories: war and youth. In the civilian ontology, this may seem like an odd pairing—out of place or forced. Yet, O’Brien and Vonnegut’s fiction communicates that the connection becomes rather obvious in a post-war ontology. War/youth reflects a similar oppositional relationship to predator/prey, exterminator/exterminated, rapist/victim, and so on. By continually referring to combat veterans as juvenile participants via descriptors such as “foolish virgins” (Vonnegut 18), “babies” (Vonnegut 18), young men “at the end of childhood” (Vonnegut: 18, 44, 87) or “kid” (Vonnegut, 53, 180; O’Brien, *Cacciato*, 3, 5, 7, 15, 39, 58, 69, etc.; *TTC* 11, 30, 40, 43, 46, 48, 55, 56, 66, 67, 86, 91, etc.), both authors foreground a notion that combat abuses and even exterminates youth. From this, readers may infer a message that war can, and perhaps should, be viewed as a form of child abuse, but Vonnegut and O’Brien carry the idea further by treating “youth” not merely as a matter of age, but as a state of existence.

Outside of combat, American youth typically experiences a natural, cultural progression into maturity and adulthood. Combat, however, renders youth irrelevant and dangerous—an entity that must be eradicated as soon as possible. According to the “true”

war stories contained in these novels, those who fail to sever ties with their youth typically act incompetently and usually die. The severance results in an abrupt and violent maturation process that contributes to the formation of a unique ontology, which differs significantly from the ontology of those who experienced a steady and culturally normative transition into adulthood. In many respects, the combat experience aligns with other forms of trauma that can occur during youth. Any form of sexual, physical, mental, and emotional abuse can also violently interrupt the maturation process, and it can be argued that such experiences also produce different ontologies. The veteran ontology differs primarily in the sense that this form of child abuse is imposed by the government and is largely socially sanctioned.

*Kurt Vonnegut: Slaughterhouse Five*

Like previous anti-war authors, Vonnegut challenges a widely held notion that grown men go to war, willingly risking their lives out of ardent devotion to a nation's cause. Instead, young men, "at the end of childhood" and naïve to the arbitrariness of political disputes that lead to combat, are the ones fighting. *Slaughterhouse Five* emphasizes this at various points throughout the novel. By ascribing an alternative title, *The Children's Crusade*, to the work, Vonnegut establishes an explicit connection between children and soldiers. He introduces this concept in the opening chapter when "Vonnegut" converses with Mary O'Hare, the wife of a war buddy. She vents her frustration over the disparity between true war and its depiction in popular media where grown and heroic men, depicted via the likes of John Wayne, risk all for God and country. Vonnegut agrees, promising to title his book "the children's crusade" and assuring her that his narrative will not lead to another John Wayne film that glorifies war.

The episode introduces the war/youth pairing by emphasizing that kids, rather than men, typically fight in war.

Later that same evening, Vonnegut and O'Hare research the historic children's crusade—an unfortunate footnote in Medieval European history. Here, Vonnegut operates at his satirical best, cutting down to the essential truths by means of a casual and off-hand historical anecdote: a couple of religious leaders propagated a notion that Europe's surplus of orphaned children could be solved by sending them to the Holy Land. There, poor children could take advantage of numerous opportunities to better their lives while advancing the influence of the Catholic Church. Europe, in turn, would rid itself of roving bands of impoverished youth. Seeming like a positive outcome for all involved, the Pope endorsed the idea. Sadly, the venture proved to be nothing more than a greedy ploy. Instead of reaching the Holy Land, the children landed in North Africa and were sold into slavery.

While the historical accuracy<sup>33</sup> of this account may be scrutinized, it plays a critical role in *Slaughterhouse Five*. For Vonnegut, the parallels between the American armed service's recruiting tactics and the legendary Children's Crusade are hauntingly apparent, because American cultural misnomers concerning war mislead young people, particularly young men. Often, American children learn about war through a lens of cultural values that glamorize and romanticize combat—not unlike the way Europe's poor children learned about the Holy Land. Participants in war are portrayed as moral heroes, fighting the good fight and attaining glory. Under such pretexts, many human

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<sup>33</sup> Peter Raedts (1977) notes that a variety of sources from the thirteenth century provide different accounts of the historical events that culminated in what is now commonly referred to as “The Children's Crusade.”

beings “at the end of childhood” volunteer for combat. Only after enlisting do they learn that they are the victims of what O’Brien describes as “a very old and terrible lie<sup>34</sup>”—a sordid bait and switch tactic. Instead of achieving heroic status, young men and women succumb to government imposed subjugation and dehumanization. For Vonnegut, boys go to war under the presumption that they will become men—a seemingly positive outcome, yet they are not told that way of growing up requires a traumatic eradication of their youth.

This emphasis on the idea that children, rather than men, are the primary participants in war surfaces repeatedly throughout the rest of the narrative. For example, when Roland Weary exhibits juvenile behavior, Vonnegut promptly clarifies that Roland “was only eighteen, was at the end of an unhappy childhood” (p. 44)—a description nearly identical to the one that he imputes to his former self and fellow soldiers during his conversation with Mary O’Hare: “We had been foolish virgins in the war, right at the end of childhood” (18). Later, when Billy Pilgrim encounters an elderly colonel, “Wild Bob,” the narrator explains that Wild Bob lost nearly forty-five hundred men, then points out that “a lot of them were children, actually” (84). Numerous other instances occur throughout the novel, but the most poignant, albeit obvious, allusion to the Children’s Crusade occurs when Billy Pilgrim and the other American soldiers arrive at a temporary POW camp. The Germans place them with British soldiers who have enjoyed an oddly comfortable existence for most of the war. A British Colonel remarks to Billy,

“You know—we’ve had to imagine the war here, and we have imagined that it was being fought by aging men like ourselves. We had forgotten that wars were fought by babies. When I saw those freshly shaved faces, it was a shock. ‘My God, my God—’ I said to myself, ‘It’s the Children’s Crusade.’” (135)

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<sup>34</sup> *The Things They Carried*, page 65.

The British POWs, ironically, resemble the way soldiers are often depicted on the silver screen. “Their bellies were like washboards. The muscles of their calves and upper arms were like cannonballs” (189). Due to a clerical error, they enjoy independent wealth in the form of plentiful food and hygienic supplies, which allows the soldiers to spend their time recreationally attempting escapes, writing and acting out plays, exercising, and grooming. The narrator explains that the Germans “adored” the British POWs because “they made war look stylish and reasonable, and fun” (120)—a feat accomplished only by an absurd stroke of luck that allows them to live on a permanent holiday. This type of existence in a German POW camp stands out as outlandish and unbelievable, but, for Vonnegut, it accurately depicts the absurdly glamorous ways that movie industries (of his time) often portray war. The actors that depict soldiers in film tend to lead privileged and leisurely lives and are even less familiar with the way real soldiers look and act than the British POWs.

By satirizing Hollywood’s tendency to portray soldiers in a manner that affirms cultural perceptions about war—that it is glorious, heroic, converts boys to men, etc.—*Slaughterhouse Five* asks readers to rethink any lingering notions that war ushers in masculinity. Real soldiers, according to Vonnegut, look much different than these well-aged and cultured individuals that help glamorize war. He emphasizes this by showing the reader that the young combat veterans that he encountered during his time in the war were weak, thin, and anything but imposing. For example, when Billy arrives in Dresden alongside a hundred other POWs, they are placed under the command of eight newly enlisted boys and elderly men. These new and, frankly, unimpressive German recruits find the Americans’ haggard appearances a welcome surprise (191). Rather than the

intimidating prospect of commanding the respect and obedience of hardened warriors, recently captured on the frontlines of battle, the Dresden soldiers quickly learn that overseeing the American POWs more accurately aligns with herding cattle than anything else. American POWs turn out to be nothing more than “crippled human beings” and “fools” (191). These scrawny, malnourished kids look nothing like the Englishmen who had “been lifting weights and chinning themselves for years” (p. 119). Their appearances boast no majestic qualities; they are simply “ridiculous creatures” (191), dehumanized to the point that they appear inferior to everyone, including the inadequate soldiers that guard them.

While the contrast between Hollywood’s soldiers and real combat veterans certainly exemplifies a creative approach to a common trope in anti-war literature—disabusal of the idea that war glamorously turns boys into men—it also points to the formation of a new ontology, resulting from the unnatural way that combat trauma forces boys to mature. Youth, as an entity and as a state of existence, cannot survive war.

Vonnegut develops this idea by personifying traumatized youth through the disjointed biography of Billy Pilgrim. As a soldier, Billy fails to grasp the severity of war as he meanders aimlessly with his head in the clouds. The other soldiers have little use for him because he lacks competence. Aloof, yet amiable, he treks through the German landscape, separated from his unit, carrying out his responsibilities in a manner akin to a kid sharing space on a playground. He illustrates this latter point through an incident where Billy stands still in the open after an enemy sniper shot nearly takes his life. The narrator explains, “Billy stood there politely, giving the marksman another chance. It was his addled understanding of the rules of warfare that the marksman should be given a

second chance” (42). Unable to distinguish between a friendly game and the dire stakes of war, Billy comes close to dying. Only by the prodding of his companions—Roland Weary and two unnamed scouts—does Billy reach safety. After hiding for a time, the men resume their clandestine march, but Billy gives up on the war. Resting by a tree, he tries to fade into oblivion.

Vonnegut uses this absurd incident to demonstrate that youth is entirely out of place in combat. Juvenile ideals need to be abandoned in order for a young man to survive. War forbids a gradual progression into adulthood. The change is abrupt and necessary for survival.

When Billy rests by the tree at the end of this episode, he becomes “unstuck in time” for the first time. Here, he briefly experiences past and future events, eventually finding himself re-experiencing a traumatic incident in his childhood: his father’s swimming lesson. Likening the event to an execution, the narrator recounts Billy’s father throwing the terrified youngster into the deep end of the pool. In so doing, Billy’s father believes that he is performing a benign coming-of-age ritual for his son. He intends for Billy to learn how to swim by the method of “sink or swim.” This form of instruction, in theory, also teaches the child self-reliant ingenuity under pressure. In some respects, this approach reflects the old adage that war turns boys into men.<sup>35</sup> Abrupt shock and self-

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<sup>35</sup> Kunze (2012) offers an interesting commentary on *Slaughterhouse-Five's* treatment of masculinity and it partially aligns with my argument that war is an assault on youth—though Kunz never goes so far as to make that assertion.

Toward the end of page 44, Kunze talks about how Vonnegut establishes "the boy/man binary early in the novel" during his interaction with Mary O'Hare.

According to Kunze, Vonnegut’s novel expresses a need to protect "boys," be it in age or level of maturity, from the realities and horrors not just of war and hegemonic masculinity, but of life---to ease them into their birthright as leaders of the world by imbuing them with compassion, rationality, and a sense of obligation to the community that does not override the integrity of the individuality. In the process, they

preservation replace the gradual process of learning, maturing, and attaining a new form of agency. In this particular instance, though, the lesson does not go as expected. Billy sinks and nearly drowns. Surprisingly, young Billy acquiesces to the prospect of dying as the event unfolds and becomes passively annoyed when he realizes someone rescued him. Though the narrator does not offer a precise age for Billy, this event appears to represent the earliest story from Billy's biography represented in the novel. Interestingly, it offers some context for Billy's "addled understanding of war." At a young age, Billy confronts his mortality. In the YMCA shower, he experiences terror in knowing that his dad is going to throw him into a pool, but the act of almost drowning assuages his fear of dying. Billy realizes that death may not be such a bad thing since life does not interest him anyway.<sup>36</sup>

The inaugural time travelling episode ends at a future party where Billy attempts to participate in a drunken fling with a woman he barely knows. She asks him why he goes by "Billy" instead of "William" and he explains that he does so for business reasons. The narrator quickly clarifies that this decision evolved not as result of Billy's shrewdness, but through his compliance with another's wishes. Billy's father-in-law felt that maintaining his childhood nickname would make him appear friendly and approachable in his vocation—optometry. This important detail reinforces Billy's

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revise a fatal myth that war makes boys into men--that is, assuming they survive. *Slaughterhouse-Five* powerfully testifies that not only are boys not masculinized by war, but that war emasculates them, revealing their ultimate impotence in the face of death. This text, designed to appeal to youth, can be read as more than mere entertainment, but as a humanistic endeavor to save this population from the disingenuous rhetoric of the American war machine as well as the dehumanizing effects war has on the individual subjected to its terrific reality. Humor alleviates this message, if only for a brief time, but it concurrently reveals that war is no laughing matter, though laughter may be the only sane response to it." (54)

<sup>36</sup> The narrator describes Billy's disinterest in living on page 75.



depiction as a flat, passive protagonist, revealing that he progresses through life in a state of arrested development. He never matures and never attains meaningful agency. In this respect, Billy functions as a personification of traumatized youth, stripped of vitality and failing to progress into a more mature state. In short, Billy serves as an imaginative microcosm for the very state of existence—youth—that war usually eradicates.

*Tim O'Brien: Going After Cacciato*

Tim O'Brien provides a similar personification of masculine youth in *Going After Cacciato*, which, like *Slaughterhouse Five*, uses an amalgamation of realistic and imaginative fiction. The narrative unfolds over the course of one night. Paul Berlin, the novel's protagonist, refuses to wake other soldiers and instead quietly assumes their guard duties. As the hours pass, Berlin reflects on his past war experiences and escapes the boredom of guard duty by creating a fantasy in which he and other members of the third squad pursue an odd soldier who went "AWOL." Three basic types of chapters comprise the novel: chapters in which Paul Berlin remembers war experiences, chapters that describe the boredom of the night watch, and chapters in which Berlin's fantasy unfolds.

While the title character, Cacciato, does not function as the protagonist, O'Brien uses him in ways that are reminiscent of *Slaughterhouse Five*'s Billy Pilgrim. Cacciato's childlike "addled understanding" of his wartime experiences distinguishes him from typical soldiers. Most men in his company pass their time smoking, telling lewd jokes, and planning out festivities for R&R. Cacciato, conversely, concerns himself with chewing gum (120, 212, 214, 218, 280, 285, 314), fishing (8, 119, 233, 247, 293, etc.), and planning unrealistic adventures (5, 58). The other soldiers notice that Cacciato is

sorely out of place in this context, and they make him the butt of numerous jokes, most of which insult his intelligence. These jokes evolve into theories that Cacciato may be afflicted with some form of mental disability. Stink, for example, believes that Cacciato's idiosyncrasies, which include absent-minded whistling when on guard duty and "recycling" mouthwash, represent "gross stupidity" (7). The medic, known to the men as "Doc," seconds Stink's notion by suggesting that Cacciato barely missed "Mongolian idiocy" during prenatal development (8). For the men, these notions provide a sufficient explanation as to why Cacciato lacks the ability to mature intellectually and engage his current situation appropriately. Cacciato's failure to adopt a combat veteran's ontology makes him an outcast, and his fellow soldiers attempt to understand the failure by assuming that he must be mentally defective.

The dangerous act of whistling during guard duty suggests that Cacciato, like Billy Pilgrim, fails to grasp the severity of combat situations, while "recycling" mouthwash points to boyish disregard for (or misunderstanding of) basic hygiene—something one might expect to encounter at a middle school summer camp. He often disappears from his unit to fish for walleye in what the men call "Lake Country." This represents one example of the soldiers' darkly ironic humor; Doc, observing a once-serene landscape now ravaged by explosions and littered with bomb craters that have filled with water, describes the scene as "the World's Greatest Lake Country" (42). The title sticks, but Cacciato, unable to conceptualize irony, takes his comrades at their literal word and sneaks away to try and catch a walleye in the mud puddles whenever he spots an opportunity to abscond from the unit.

While the soldiers attribute Cacciato's idiosyncrasies to a mental handicap, the narrator carefully tries to correct the reader's impression of these theories by explaining that Cacciato's juvenile behavior "was all part of a strange, boyish simplicity that the men tolerated the way they might tolerate a frisky pup" (8). This is an important distinction. Even though the soldiers' way of interpreting Cacciato's odd behavior is understandable, the narrator's clarification signifies that O'Brien does not want the reader to dismiss him as mere comic relief. Cacciato's role in the novel transcends the trope of the benign, good-natured, simple-minded stock character. He serves a greater purpose as the personification of the soldiers' departed youth—an intricate component of their ontology prior to their combat initiation.

O'Brien illustrates this idea throughout the novel. One example occurs when Paul Berlin reflects on his early days in Vietnam. His unit encounters a particularly bad firefight in which one of the young men dies of "fright" (a heart attack brought on by the traumatic shock of the event). Afterward, Berlin tries to stay aloof from the other men in his unit. As one of the newest recruits in the company, he perceives the other men as crass and uncivil, hardened by combat. Determined not to let the war alter his personality, he tries to maintain a semblance of normality—keeping his pre-war ontology intact—through isolation.

Later that evening, Cacciato amiably invades Berlin's willful solitude by offering him a drink of water and a stick of gum. Cacciato instructs him "Chew it quiet, okay? Don't blow no bubbles or nothing" (212). Both reflect on the day's events, but Cacciato finds Berlin reticent, reluctant to engage in conversation, so he takes it upon himself to carry the dialogue and recounts the experience aloud by using words like "jeez" and

“weird.” Such words further distinguish Cacciato from the other soldiers because it lacks the vulgarity that the other soldiers usually employ. In so doing, Cacciato unwittingly presents himself in a manner that is entirely out of place in the context of war. Most exchanges between experienced and inexperienced soldiers, particularly instructive ones, are direct and cold, if not blatantly antagonistic. O’Brien offers an example of this type of interaction when Paul Berlin first arrives in Vietnam and overhears a young soldier attempting to articulate the dire nature of combat to some of Berlin’s fellow new arrivals.

“Real tough shit, real bad. I remember this guy Uhlander. Not such a bad dick, but he made the mistake of thinking it wasn’t so bad. It’s bad. You know what bad is? Bad is evil. Bad is what happened to Uhlander. I don’t wanna scare the bejesus out of you— that’s not what I want— but, shit, you guys are gonna die.” (39).<sup>37</sup>

Even though Cacciato has more combat experience than Paul Berlin, nothing in his overall tone suggests that he views the green recruit as anything other than a potential new friend. His directive to “chew quietly” reveals a mindset more in line with a boy welcoming a new kid to school, advising Berlin on a way to break a minor rule without getting caught by a teacher. In this respect, Cacciato demonstrates a similar schoolboy mentality to Billy Pilgrim who amiably gives a German sniper another opportunity to hit his target.

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<sup>37</sup> This idea is also presented in *The Things They Carried*, when a fictive “Tim O’Brien” relentlessly hazes a new doctor who failed to treat “Tim” for shock after he received a bullet wound. Other soldiers eventually intervene:

*“Let it ride,” he said. “The kid messed up bad, for sure, but you have to take into account how green he was. Brand-new, remember? Thing is, he’s doing a lot better now. I mean, listen, the guy knows his shit. Say what you want, but he kept Morty Phillips alive”* (188).

As the conversation between Berlin and Cacciato unfolds, Cacciato attempts to establish some common ground with Berlin by learning which flavors of chewing gum Berlin prefers.

The boy smiled his big smile. “You like that gum? I got other kinds if you don’t like it. I got—”

“I like it.”

“I got Black Jack here. You like Black Jack? Jeez, I love it! Juicy Fruit’s second, but Black Jack’s first. I save it up for rainy days, so to speak. Know what I mean? What you got there is Doublemint.”

“I like it.”

“Sure,” the round-faced soldier said, the child. “Except for Black Jack and Juicy Fruit, it’s my favorite. You like Black Jack gum?” (214).

The conversation displays Cacciato’s “simple, boyish nature.” Like a “frisky pup,” Cacciato amiably perseveres in getting Paul Berlin’s attention even though Berlin clearly lacks interest and prefers to avoid conversation. It also offers the reader a glimpse into Cacciato’s mindset, which preoccupies itself with oversimplifications: war is bad, but chewing gum is good. Cacciato’s nagging persistence as a personification of youth, combined with Berlin’s reluctance to interact with him, signifies that Berlin’s combat experience has begun to eradicate his youth—a state of existence unfit for the context of war. Any vestiges of this part of his former ontology inhibits the soldierly competence necessary to survive combat.

Cacciato’s reflection on the day’s events, interlarded with the pleasure he derives from chewing gum, emblemizes the only war-related advice that Paul Berlin received from his father before leaving for Vietnam: “You’ll see some terrible stuff, I guess. That’s how it goes. But try to look for the good things, too. They’ll be there if you look.

So watch for them” (63). Berlin clings to this advice, and he tries to follow it throughout the novel (63, 209, 211, 227, etc.). It ultimately serves as the primary motivation for Paul Berlin’s imagined pursuit of Cacciato.

And [focusing on the good] was what [Paul Berlin] did. Even now, figuring how things might have happened on the road to Paris, it was a way of looking for the very best of all possible outcomes. How, with luck and courage and endurance, they might have found a way. [. . .] Sure, it was swell advice. Think about the good things, keep your eye on Paris. (63-64)

This “figuring how things might have happened” refers to Berlin’s fictive quest to capture his AWOL comrade.

The “swell advice” sounds good in theory, but it proves difficult in a real combat situation. After witnessing the “infinite waste” of war (7), what immediate good might Berlin focus on? In reality, the only good present in such situations comes in the form of trivial pleasures like cigarettes and chewing gum, and escaping the horror of his situation through imagination. These trivialities provide a welcome and necessary distraction—a way to maintain sanity in a traumatic situation. While Berlin struggles to follow his father’s advice, Cacciato comes by it naturally, demonstrating how to focus on the good. In the context of war, Cacciato’s ability to instinctively follow this advice causes him to stand out from other soldiers.

Eventually, Cacciato breaks down Berlin’s commitment to “stay aloof” (211) and gets him to agree that the day’s events were weird. This concession eventually causes Berlin to lose control of his thought processes, which leads to a fit of irrepressible giggling at the absurdity of everything he just experienced—a completely inappropriate response from the perspective of a reader uninitiated in the combat experience. Such a response appears akin to laughing at a funeral. This episode signifies a regression of

maturity. Rather than walking away from a traumatic afternoon with a somber, pensive attitude, reflecting on the lessons war taught him that day, Berlin, through the influence of Cacciato, reverts to juvenile behavior. In this respect, O'Brien, like Vonnegut, challenges the old adage that war operates as an appropriate catalyst for turning boys into men. The obvious stagnation in Cacciato's maturity level, combined with Berlin's inability to stoically experience combat and remain mentally unscathed, aligns with the arrested development that Vonnegut portrays through Billy Pilgrim. Billy Pilgrim, after all, assumes a passive demeanor and tries to abandon the war when he rests by a tree and imagines his own existence peacefully vaporizing into oblivion. While Cacciato later actively departs from combat, his abandonment demonstrates a similar "addled understanding" of his role as a soldier. Rather than persevering as a misfit in combat, Cacciato, like Billy Pilgrim, gives up on the war and attempts to leave.

Unlike Billy Pilgrim, Cacciato displays some prowess in battle. Berlin cites specific examples to defend the idea that, whatever Cacciato's reasons for running might be, cowardice in no way served as a motivating factor. For one, Cacciato pulled a Vietnamese soldier from a bunker, and he was willing to kill enemy combatants (15). These apparently brave actions fail to negate the soldier's impressions of Cacciato's pervasive "stupidity," but Berlin's assertions also complicate an easy explanation for Cacciato's departure. As Berlin insists, "You can't call him a coward. You can't say he ran out because he was scared" (15). This idea that Cacciato did not leave out of fear, combined with the narrator's earlier response to the soldiers' belief in Cacciato's utter stupidity, further establishes the idea that while Cacciato displays qualities found in

humorous stock characters, he functions as a complex idea, particularly in the manner in which Paul Berlin portrays him during the fictive pursuit to Paris.

The narrator's description of Cacciato's physical appearance also supports the idea that Cacciato functions as a personification of masculine youth. His defining features are nebulous—round face, usually wearing a smile. O'Brien establishes this early in the novel when Berlin's unit begins to pursue Cacciato through the jungle. Berlin tries "to picture Cacciato's face. He [tries] hard, but the image [comes] out fuzzy" (7-8), and the narrator explains that

[t]here was something curiously unfinished about Cacciato. Open-faced and naïve and plump, Cacciato lacked the fine detail, the refinements and final touches, that maturity ordinarily marks on a boy of seventeen years. The result was blurred and uncolored and bland. You could look at him then look away and not remember what you'd seen (8).

Cacciato's elusive features remain a focal point throughout the novel (11, 26, 120, 122, 173, 209, etc.). By emphasizing the vagueness of his appearance, the narrator further establishes the idea that Cacciato functions as a concept rather than an authentic and believable character. O'Brien presents Cacciato as an idea, an entity, a state of being. In short, Cacciato is youth personified.

This personification of youth also appears in the way that O'Brien patterns Cacciato's behavior after that of other boy-protagonists in vintage American literature. His obsession with simple enjoyments like chewing gum are reminiscent of Huck Finn's penchant for smoking tobacco and swimming in muddy Mississippi River water. Like Mark Twain's boy protagonists, Cacciato evades the confines of adult responsibilities by fishing and embarking on a grandiose adventure. Yet, this subtle allusion to classic American bildungsromans contrasts with the horror and gore produced by guerilla



warfare. *Going After Cacciato* operates not as a traditional coming of age story, but as an imaginative lament for departed youth. The plot of traditional boy-adventure stories centers on the boy protagonist who temporarily leaves the confines of the imminent responsibilities of adult life in order to relish and gradually bid farewell to his youth. War deprives Paul Berlin, and other soldiers like him, of the opportunity to transition into adulthood in this manner. The plot of this novel, therefore centers not on the boy adventurer, but on the young man imaginatively pursuing him. The fact that the plot unfolds in Berlin's imagination and that the boy adventurer, represented by Cacciato, remains perpetually elusive points to the notion that Berlin is mourning the loss of his youth. Berlin's youth—now a casualty of war—exists only in his memory and imagination. Because the combat trauma disrupts Berlin's maturation process, the only way for him to relish the waning moments of his youth, and also come to terms with the fact that childhood must pass, is through imagination.

In this respect, O'Brien reiterates an idea that Vonnegut explores in *Slaughterhouse Five*: combat necessitates an abrupt severance with youth, because a propensity for boyish leisure is a deadly liability in such contexts. This transition to adulthood unfolds suddenly and violently, paralleling the very incident that incites Berlin's uncontrollable laughter during his post-combat conversation with Cacciato. Earlier that day a soldier, Billy Boy Watkins, stepped on a landmine and lost a foot (216). In shock, Billy felt embarrassed because he lost his boot. He stares at the place where his foot once was and attempts to put his boot back on, unable to comprehend that his foot still remains in the boot. Just as combat brutally splits a part of Billy's body, so war forces boys to sever ties with their youth.

Berlin's imagined pursuit of Cacciato functions, on one level, as an allegory of this violent severance. His youth departed out of necessity, and he projects aspects of that former part of himself onto the Cacciato that he envisages pursuing. In this attempt to imaginatively reclaim his youth, Berlin mentally escapes the trauma of war. As Berlin narrates the story, Cacciato functions as a representation of Berlin's youth, which is now no longer an intricate part of Berlin but a separate entity entirely. Berlin's youth exists only in his imagination and memory, and, like his inability to recall Cacciato's specific physical features, that aspect of his former self proves vague and elusive.

*Tim O'Brien: The Things They Carried*

O'Brien develops the war/youth opposition in a more realistic fashion in *The Things They Carried*. While it lacks the fantastic elements of Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* and O'Brien's earlier novel, *Going After Cacciato*, *The Things They Carried* continues to blend genres in an attempt to communicate across an ontological divide. Most of the chapters in *The Things They Carried* can stand alone as short stories, but they also combine to form a postmodern novel that appears to reflect the chaotic patterns of memory<sup>38</sup> as they exist in the mind of the author. Throughout this work, O'Brien echoes Vonnegut's emphasis that soldiers enter war attached to their youth,<sup>39</sup> and until combat experience eradicates this mode of existence, it remains a lethal burden. One simply cannot survive war with his youth intact. O'Brien shows this in the opening, title chapter of the novel where Lt. Jimmy Cross renounces his youth in order to be a better soldier

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<sup>38</sup> Hemingway's story cycle linked together as *In Our Time* (1925) reflects an earlier iteration of this technique.

<sup>39</sup> Terms like "boy," "child" and "kid" are employed in over a 100 instances throughout the novel; the vast majority refer specifically to either American or Vietnamese soldiers. Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* also emphasizes the connection between children and soldiers.

after one of his men is killed in combat. Cross believes that his personal distraction—thinking about a love interest back home—prevented him from acting competently. In his mind this negligence resulted in the death of one of his men, so he vows to never let such things divert his attention again. He gets rid of anything that will remind him of the girl with whom he is infatuated, and, in so doing, attempts to become an ideal soldier. He realizes that he has to immunize himself from distractions: thoughts of home, love, etc. Not only his life, but also the lives of his men, depend on his uncompromising mental focus on the task at hand.

Jimmy Cross's loving and jealous infatuation with a girl back home reflects a pre-war ontology where crushes and "puppy love" often play a key role in the maturation process. In that context, learning to compromise and sacrifice for a significant other prepares one for life-partnerships. The guilt that Jimmy Cross feels over the loss of one of his soldiers forces him to transfer this mode of learning selflessness and companionship from love interests to a nurturing role for the young men under his command. Destroying photographs and other vestiges of his infatuation with Martha proves to be an act of penance for the boy who dies on his watch as well as an act of selfless devotion for the lives of the soldiers that continue to depend on his competence. In this respect, war forces Lt. Cross to intentionally give up key aspects of his former way of seeing the world: allowing naïve, romantic infatuations to distract one from the task at hand, and the consequences are deadly. Jimmy turns his back on this aspect of his pre-war ontology and vows to lead a different life in the context of war. Survival in this context necessitates the eradication of youth.

Once again, the war/youth opposition that becomes apparent in a post-combat ontology comes through in this story. While this appears in the other two novels that this thesis explores, O'Brien takes a different approach in conveying it in *The Things They Carried*. *Slaughterhouse Five* and *Going After Cacciato* use flat characters to personify masculine youth. Vonnegut expresses this through Billy Pilgrim's "addled understanding" of the rules of war and through Roland Weary's inability to separate the reality of his true war experience from the romantic ideas of war that he entertains in his imagination. Neither of these characters are well-developed or believable. O'Brien, in turn, communicates the war/youth opposition through Paul Berlin's metaphorical pursuit of his departed youth in *Going After Cacciato*. Both novels alert the reader to the idea that war ontologically reconfigures young men, and this change is predicated on the war/youth (predator/prey, eradicator/eradicated) categories. O'Brien, however, attempts to explicate this idea in *The Things They Carried* by describing *how* the ontological change unfolds through authentic and complex characters.

The description of this change begins with establishing the youthful state in which most soldiers enter war. In the third chapter, "Spin," he writes:

The average age in our platoon, I'd guess, was nineteen or twenty, and as a consequence things often took on a curiously playful atmosphere, like a sporting event at some exotic reform school. The competition could be lethal, yet there was a childlike exuberance to it all, lots of pranks and horseplay. Like when Azar blew away Ted Lavender's puppy. "What's everybody so upset about?" Azar said. "I mean, Christ, I'm just a boy." (TTC p. 35).

Likening the platoon's atmosphere to a type of school affirms a similar idea that Vonnegut presents in *Slaughterhouse Five* via Billy Pilgrim's "addled understanding" of the rules of war in the previously mentioned incident when Billy gives a sniper a second

opportunity to kill him. Giving someone a second chance is appropriate for an amiable schoolyard game but not war. Likewise, Cacciato's boyish advice to Paul Berlin to chew his gum "quietly" without blowing bubbles also reflects a juvenile perspective. Here, O'Brien presents the schoolboy mentality as matter-of-fact information, rather than depicting it through imaginatively flat characters that symbolize youth. When the soldiers from this platoon arrive in war, they more closely align with high school students than anything else. They are boys at the end of their childhood, so common sense strongly suggests that giving teenagers deadly weapons and then placing them in a setting that "was nakedly and aggressively boring" (32) is a bad idea. Yet, in the context of war, people who are culturally conditioned in the pre-war ontology may not consider this. O'Brien attempts to bring the readers' assumptions on this matter to light early in the novel by showing that soldiers succumb to juvenile-delinquent antics one might expect from a high school student. Unfortunately, the consequences of these antics prove much more severe.

In this particular instance, a puppy becomes a casualty of these shenanigans. While the outcome proves unsavory, it results in no direct consequence for the soldiers involved. The perpetrator whimsically shrugs off the incident, citing his youth—"I'm just a boy"—as an excuse for the bad behavior. Other anecdotes in the novel, however, demonstrate that this type of immaturity in a war context often leads to more severe consequences. For example, a few chapters later, in "How to Tell a True War Story," O'Brien recounts the death of Rat Kiley in one of the fragmented narratives contained in that chapter. Speaking from the context of a mature, post-combat ontology, the narrator

explains that some soldiers were too green to understand the gravity of their combat situation.

They were kids; they just didn't know. A nature hike, they thought, not even a war, so they went off into the shade of some giant trees—quadruple canopy, no sunlight at all—and they were giggling and calling each other yellow mother and playing a silly game they'd invented. The game involved smoke grenades, which were harmless unless you did stupid things, and what they did was pull out the pin and stand a few feet apart and play catch under the shade of those huge trees. Whoever chickened out was a yellow mother. And if nobody chickened out, the grenade would make a light popping sound and they'd be covered with smoke and they'd laugh and dance around and then do it again. (pp. 66-67)

During this game, Rat steps on a landmine, and the men are soon pulling pieces of his corpse out of a tree. The incident serves as morbid and realistic illustration for a notion introduced in both *Slaughterhouse* and *Cacciato*: war will either eradicate youth, or youth will make it easy for war to claim another victim.

Through these two incidents, O'Brien offers some brief illustrations of the war/youth opposition. These more realistic examples affirm the imaginative iterations presented in *Slaughterhouse* and *Cacciato*. O'Brien further demonstrates the efficacy of this concept by detailing his own ontological transition that occurred at the expense of his youth. Throughout *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien contrasts his pre-war personhood with the man that war forces him to become. This strong autobiographical emphasis, fictive or not, adds a new layer of reality to the true war story. While *Slaughterhouse Five* and *Cacciato* depict main characters willing to give up on war and escape, O'Brien explores the concept of flight in a much more personal manner in "On the Rainy River." There, O'Brien reveals that his transition to a new ontology began on June 17, 1968, when he received his draft notice. That event, along with the mourning period that follows, serves as the initial catalyst that begins to fundamentally complicate his pre-war

worldview, particularly his perception of “home.” Home, after all, should be a sanctuary—a safe place, especially in America where the law of the land supposedly guarantees life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. This experience paved the way for a year’s worth of traumatic experiences, which fundamentally altered his understanding of home and security.

Objecting to the war on both moral and political grounds, “O’Brien” strongly considers dodging the draft. Only the fear of damaging his reputation prevents him from doing so. He explains that his

hometown was a conservative little spot on the prairie, a place where tradition counted, and it was easy to imagine people sitting around a table down at the old Gobbler Café on Main Street, coffee cups poised, the conversation slowly zeroing in on the young O’Brien kid, how the damned sissy had taken off for Canada. (42-43)

His fear of rejection and humiliation goads him into submitting to the U.S. Government and going to war. Of all of the things he regrets about Vietnam, the act of going to war shames him more than anything. He lacked the courage to face the rejection of his hometown community, and he ultimately concludes, “I was a coward. I went to war” (58).

Before he arrives at this decision, however, he comes very close to dodging the draft. About a month after he receives the draft notice, he heads north and arrives at the Rainy River, “which separates Minnesota from Canada, and which for [him] separated one life from another” (45). This reference to two different lives appears to be a mere lifestyle decision for the young “O’Brien.” He has the opportunity to live a life on the run, as a fugitive from the law and as a reject from his home community, or he can go to war and either die or return home to the approval of that community. Unbeknownst to

him, the analogous river separates much more than countries and lifestyles—it also symbolizes an opportunity to continue to reside in this pre-war ontology. If he accepts this opportunity, war can remain an abstract and intellectual concept—a footnote in his overall worldview. However, if he chooses to go to war, his worldview will undergo a dramatic shift, forever colored by his combat experiences. Of course there is no way for young “O’Brien” to understand the full impact of his decision. In that moment, he remains preoccupied with the unfairness of the draft notice and his frustration with the naivety of those who approve of the war. “O’Brien” bases his reluctance to go to Vietnam on intellectual and ethical concepts concerning the purpose and worthiness of war. At this point, “O’Brien’s” objections stem from a pre-war ontology, where ideas about war reside in the sphere of intellect and theory. Later, war becomes less abstract and more personal. As veteran, he loses the privilege of thinking of war as an external concept, because his war experiences fundamentally change his reality.

Writing with the benefit of hindsight, “O’Brien” describes some other aspects of this pre-war ontology and expresses a sense of foreboding when he recalls imagining what the war might be like.

Twenty-one years old, an ordinary kid with all the ordinary dreams and ambitions, and all I wanted was to live the life I was born to— a mainstream life— I loved baseball and hamburgers and cherry Cokes— and now I was off on the margins of exile, leaving my country forever, and it seemed so grotesque and terrible and sad. (48).

The idea of leaving his country “forever” indicates an assumption that his flight from the war may result in permanent rejection from his community. Ironically, his situation actually reflects a catch-22, because even if he goes to war and returns alive, his manner of perceiving the world will drastically alter his notions of home and everything else. In



that sense, he will never return home. Whether he flees or goes to war, he will have permanently left the country—at least in respect to how he perceives it in his pre-war ontology.

“O’Brien” reflects on the week he spent in a run-down fishing resort, contemplating his options. He wonders if that time of near-monastic solitude and the other events of that summer “didn’t happen in some other dimension, a place where your life exists before you’ve lived it” (52). He notes that “none of it ever seemed real” as he made his way to a future that “he didn’t understand and didn’t want” (52). By pondering the reality of the past, O’Brien hints at the ontological change in a manner similar to Billy Pilgrim when he refuses to talk about the war to Valencia, noting that it would “seem like a dream” (156).

An elderly fisherman who owns the resort helps “O’Brien” sort through his tough decision. One day, he takes “O’Brien” fishing on the river and draws the boat close enough to the Canadian shoreline for “O’Brien” to jump out and swim to the shore. Retrospectively, he writes, “I think he meant to bring me up against the realities, to guide me across the river and to take me to the edge and to stand a kind of vigil as I chose a life for myself” (53). During this time in the boat, the young man decides that he must go to war in spite of his political and moral misgivings. On the shoreline, he envisions all of the people who have had or will have a significant impact on his life: the townspeople, his family, his wife and unborn daughter, a Vietnamese man that he will kill, and many others (55-57). The vision compels him to return home and comply with the government’s mandate.

All those eyes on me—the town, the whole universe—and I couldn’t risk the embarrassment. It was as if there were an audience to my life, that

swirl of faces along the river, and in my head I could hear people screaming at me. Traitor! they yelled. Turncoat! Pussy! I felt myself blush. I couldn't tolerate it. I couldn't endure the mockery, or the disgrace, or the patriotic ridicule. Even in my imagination, the shore just twenty yards away, I couldn't make myself be brave. It had nothing to do with morality. Embarrassment, that's all it was. (57)

While he disagrees with America's involvement in Vietnam, his objections stem from theory and intellect that differs from the perspective largely held by his community. Since the vision occurs in his own imagination, the source of the ridicule he experiences in this incident stems from an American ideology that tends to glorify war and honor its participants. In response to this cultural ontology, O'Brien chooses to serve as a soldier in Vietnam, survives the war, and returns home to write about the experience. Yet, he carefully reminds the reader in the closing lines "it's not a happy ending. I was a coward. I went to the war" (58).

The assault on "O'Brien's" youth begins not with his first combat experience, or on the day he arrived in Vietnam, or even during basic training. It begins at home when he receives the draft notice. His cumulative war experiences that ensue result in a long-standing, if not permanent, change. Throughout the novel, he references his age: "forty-three years old" (31, 33, 36, 171, 213, 223, 232) and still trying to reconcile his state of radical alterity with the cultural ontology that originally bullied him into complying with the draft notice. Informing perspectives rooted in that pre-war ontology by depicting "true" war stories is an important part of the reconciliation process. For O'Brien, people residing in an ontology that lacks direct combat experience need to understand the ways in which they comply with the system that promotes war, which in turn assaults youth. When O'Brien confesses that shame, rather than a sense of duty to one's country,

motivated him to fight in the war, he implicates those residing in a culture that endorses war and expects all young men to participate willingly.

O'Brien also elaborates on the role that shame plays in war's assault on youth in the title chapter, "The Things They Carried." As the title indicates, he frames the narrative around a discussion of the things that soldiers carry into combat—military equipment, various weapons, simple amenities, photographs, etc. Perhaps the most poignant aspects of this story are relayed when he discusses the emotional burdens they carried—one of which is the fear of embarrassment:

They carried their reputations. They carried the soldier's greatest fear, which was the fear of blushing. Men killed, and died, because they were embarrassed not to. It was what had brought them to the war in the first place, nothing positive, no dreams of glory or honor, just to avoid the blush of dishonor. They died so as not to die of embarrassment. They crawled into tunnels and walked point and advanced under fire. Each morning, despite the unknowns, they made their legs move. They endured. [...] they were too frightened to be cowards. (20-21)

Here, O'Brien exposes a key aspect of masculine youth—a fear of embarrassment that surpasses the fear of killing and dying. While he reiterates this idea on a more personal level in "On the Rainy River," this passage from "The Things They Carried" suggests that the fear of embarrassment affects most soldiers, goading them to participate in traumatic experiences that radically alter their understanding of reality and existence. In so doing, he calls yet another binary into question: bravery/cowardice. Refusing to participate in combat may appear to be an act of cowardice to those residing in a pre-war ontology, yet O'Brien's perspective indicates that for a kid rapidly approaching the end of his childhood, the prospect of facing humiliation can be more daunting than facing death. Choosing the lesser of the two fears should perhaps be viewed as an act of cowardice.

O'Brien, like Vonnegut, uses fiction to counter the idea that war can serve as a catalyst that helps boys mature by teaching them discipline, duty, and honor. For them, war kills and destroys, like a malignant tumor or a sociopathic pedophile. Yet, these authors were not brought up to view war as a destructive entity. They entered war regarding it as a purposeful event that serves a greater end, and their experience taught them that this manner of thinking is nothing more than "a very old, and very terrible lie."

### **Section V—Concluding Remarks**

To some, this application may seem out of place, because the most visible anthropologic uses for the Ontological Turn appear when one seeks to understand a culture that is far removed from the observer (e.g. an anthropologist, educated in the west, attempts to understand Amerindian perspectives on reality). In the case for this thesis, a white educated American male applies the Ontological Turn to other white, educated American males—albeit from different generations. The fact that the selected works for this thesis are widely read and generally regarded as important late Twentieth-Century American novels only adds to this anomaly. Because of their popularity, these works hardly seem like viable examples of literature that is "othered" or denigrated. Yet, the close readings afforded to these texts in the earlier sections of the thesis show that there may be some aspects of these works that are overlooked, or dismissed as metaphoric. This ontological approach, after all, reveals that the combat veteran ontology blurs the line separating the literal and the metaphoric. Billy Pilgrim's arrested development and his perception of time, Tim O'Brien's distinction between remembering and "re-happening," and Paul Berlin's imagined pursuit of Cacciato demonstrate that first-hand combat experience results in change—radical alterity—and applying the ontological turn to these texts uncovers new ways of validating and understanding

perspectives on war that are often overlooked or misunderstood by those who have not experienced combat first-hand.

Entertaining the idea that a multiplicity of realities may exist through this ontological approach attempts to provide a degree of “ethnographic justice” to O’Brien’s and Vonnegut’s perspectives by recognizing and accepting alterity. Approaching other works by other veteran authors through this lens should also yield new insights that further inform readers’ perspectives on new realities formed through the trauma of combat. Some obvious choices for such readings might include the fiction of Hemingway, Mailer, Heller, and others who reveal “truth about war” through fiction and satire. It seems, however, that this approach could also apply to veteran authors who choose to write about topics that are not directly related to their war-time experiences. Both J.R.R. Tolkien and J.D. Salinger, for example, allegedly worked on early manuscripts of what would later evolve into their seminal works during their time in war.<sup>40</sup> Holden Caulfield, Salinger’s famous character, holds similar characteristics to Vonnegut’s Billy Pilgrim and O’Brien’s fictive “Tim O’Brien” and Cacciato in the sense that these characters are misfits, holding a perspective on reality that differs from the cultural norms of their immediate communities. One could interpret Caulfield’s struggles to assimilate into his surrounding culture, which eventually culminates in an absolute rejection of society, as Salinger’s attempt to communicate truth-through-fiction across an ontological divide. On a different note, Tolkien’s elaborate world-building through his mythological Middle Earth emphasizes the interplay of power. While he differs from

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<sup>40</sup> See "Holden Caulfield's Goddam War" by Kenneth Slawenski, published in *Vanity Fair* in 2011 and Boenig and Chance's "The Lord of the Rings: The Mythology of Power." Published in *South Central Review* 1993

Vonnegut and O'Brien in the sense that he treats war as an event, rather an entity, he encourages his readers to view the desire for power as humanity's supreme flaw. This flaw leads to war and other human-inflicted tragedies. Tolkien's decision to explore this idea through fiction and invented myth perhaps points to a desire to communicate a cross-ontological perspective.

I mention these latter authors only to point out that the Ontological Turn need not be relegated specifically to O'Brien and Vonnegut's fiction. The works analyzed in this thesis are merely a starting point, demonstrating that the ontological anthropology unveils new ways of interpreting the war fiction of veteran authors.

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Adjunct Professor, Olivet Nazarene University  
2012 – Present  
*Courses taught: ENG -109: College Writing; ENG-110: Principles of Academic Writing (online); ENG-150: Expos and Research (online); ENG-200: College Research and Writing II (online); ENG-204: World Literature (online); ENG-301: Thematic Studies in Literature (online).*

Planned Giving Coordinator, Olivet Nazarene University

August 2010 – August 2013

*Coordinated with the marketing office to design promotional/fundraising materials for the university; prepared trusts, annuities, and other contractual materials for the accounting office; re-launched various defunct planned giving initiatives. Assisted major gift officers in researching potential donors, planned events, worked with annual giving to set three consecutive record breaking years, each exceeding \$1 million.*

Web Marketing Manager, Olivet Nazarene University

November 2006 – August 2010

*Oversaw university's web presence; wrote, edited, and distributed a monthly html e-news bulletin for 20,000 subscribers; coordinated with web development team to produce webpages for individual departments; advertised public events held on campus*