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Some Strive to Remember, Others Wish They Could Forget: The Intersection of Culture and Trauma in Vietnam War Literatures

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Some Strive to Remember, Others Wish They Could Forget: The Intersection of Culture and Trauma in Vietnam War Literatures

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Abstract

Contemporary trauma theory still relies on the Freudian principles of the dissolution of identity and the inaccessibility of traumatic memory that were first conceived of nearly one hundred years ago. Since their conception, these theories have been assumed by trauma theorists to be universally applicable. In my readings of the Vietnam War literature of Tim O'Brien, Yusef Komunyakaa, Viet Than Nguyen, and Ocean Vuong, I seek to subvert the ethnocentrism of this singular trauma theory. I delve into Literary Trauma Studies, Asian American Studies, and Psychoacoustical Studies in order to illuminate the differences in representations of trauma produced by cultural difference. Investigating the intersection of culture and the representation of trauma illustrated that the privileging of work by white American veterans in the canon of Vietnam war literature serves to erase the cultural memories of African and Asian Americans.

Introduction

> Its hero, Tancred, unwittingly kills his beloved Clorinda in a duel while she is disguised in the armour of an enemy knight. After her burial he makes his way into a strange magic forest which strikes the Crusaders' army with terror. He slashes with his sword at a tall tree; but blood streams from the cut and the voice of Clorinda, whose soul is imprisoned in the tree, is heard complained that he has wounded his beloved once again.
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> --- "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," Sigmund Freud (1920) [1]

In this passage Freud articulates an unsettling yet intriguing observation. For Tancred, the hero of the romantic epic *Gerusalemme Liberata*, the traumatic occurrence is repeated over and over as "the unwitting reenactment of an event that one cannot simply leave behind."[2] Freud terms this "repetition at the heart of catastrophe" traumatic neurosis. [3] What is it about a traumatic event that leads to such peculiar cognitive patterns? Cathy Caruth, in *Unclaimed Experience*, argues that a wound upon the mind has different consequences than a wound upon the body.[4] A wound upon the mind creates a discontinuity within the mind itself. The traumatic event cannot be encoded into consciousness as are conventionally remembered events. The traumatic event occurs so far outside the realm of normal experience that the mind lacks the cognitive tools to assimilate it into the consciousness, and by implication, Caruth argues, into the self. Therefore the original traumatic event cannot be accessed through direct recall but only through unconscious repetitions of the traumatic event. This is why, in Freud's reading, Tancred can only finally hear the voice of Clorinda when he unwittingly "wound(s) his lover once again."

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[1] Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," in *Freud, Complete Works*, ed. Ivan Smith, 2010, 3726.
[2] Cathy Caruth, "Unclaimed Experience: Trauma Narrative, and History," Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1996, 2.
[3] *Ibid.*
[4] *Ibid,* 3.

Freud's psychoanalytic theory of trauma forms the foundation of the modern abreactive model of trauma. Literary trauma theory depends heavily upon it. For example, trauma theorist Kali Tal's conceptual framework of the shattering of the personal myth and the liminal state is informed by the Freudian claim that trauma as produces "a 'temporal gap' and a dissolution of the self."[5] Like Caruth, Tal assumes a singular, universal model of the posttraumatic psyche. By contrast, Michelle Balaev argues that literary criticism should widen its perspective on trauma. She writes, "A discursive dependence upon a single psychological theory of trauma produces a homogenous interpretation of the diverse representations in the trauma novel and the interplay that occurs between language, experience, memory, and place."[6] The implication here is that theoretical models produced by the dominant culture, such as Freud's account, are often assumed to be universally applicable, while in reality they are culturally specific. Subverting the ethnocentrism of current trauma theory is particularly urgent as one considers global political tensions today. White nationalism is on the rise globally in connection with widespread xenophobia in opposition to immigration.[7] It is imperative now to seek to understand diverse representations of trauma as the narrative of white victimhood on which white nationalism is founded works to erase the broad-based traumatic experiences of populations displaced by events like the Syrian civil war, the U.S. war on drugs, U.S. imperialism in Central America, and less recently, the Vietnam War.

In this thesis, I investigate the language of sound used in literatures surrounding the space of the Vietnam war. I use this common analytical framework to elucidate the effects of cultural

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[5] Michelle Balaev, "Trends in Literary Trauma Theory," *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, 41:2, 2008, 149.
[6] *Ibid.*
[7] "Trump Orders Wall to be Built on Mexican Border," bbc.com, January 26th, 2017.
Richard Perez-Pena, "Two New Zealand Mosques, a Hate-Filled Massacre Designed for its Time," Newyorktimes.com, March 15th, 2019.

differences upon the representations of trauma in these works. I ground my analyses within three primary fields of scholarship: Literary Trauma Studies, Asian American Studies, and Psychoacoustical Studies. I will now briefly touch on each of the four chapters of the thesis, taking care to contextualize the author and their work, explain the main argumentative thrust, and explain the main theoretical concepts at play.

In chapter one I begin with analysis of the first story of Tim O'Brien's fiction collection *The Things They Carried*, a seminal work of U.S. Vietnam War literature. It is a work deeply imprinted upon the American cultural consciousness, considered "a staple of college and high school English classes, celebrated as one of the most important books about the experience of war."[8] This popular text, written by and about a white, able-bodied, male veteran, therefore informing the dominant American cultural understandings of war trauma to a degree that possibly no other written work can compare to. As I look to probe cultural differences in the representation of the "trauma" of the U.S. war in Vietnam it is important to begin with analysis of a piece which falls under the dominant narrative. This will allow for the development of an understanding of the dominant representations of traumas through which to compare the other primary texts with which I engage.

I enter this work through analysis of sound imagery in relation to depictions of trauma. My analysis begins with an exploration of the interaction of psychoacoustic and trauma theories. In his essay, "The Sound of Memory: Music and Acoustic Origins," Alexander Stein argues that the processing of sound is crucial to psychological development and the formation of memory. [9] Sound's capacity to affect psychological development acts as its link to trauma theory. I engage

[8] Tim O'Brien, interview with Neal Conan, *Talk of the Nation,* podcast audio, March 24th, 2010.
[9] Alexander Stein, "The Sound of Memory: Music and Acoustic Origins," *American Imago,* 64:1, 2007, 59-85.

with trauma theory in this analysis through the abreactive model which, as previously mentioned, is based on the Freudian concepts of the inaccessibility of trauma and the division of self. To understand what "the division of self" truly signifies, I turn to the trauma theorist Kali Tal. She defines personal myth as, "the particular set of explanations and expectations generated by an individual to account for his or her circumstances."[10] This "set of explanations and expectations" is a product of psychological development, and therefore can be affected by traumatic sound. Thus after being exposed to traumatic sonic stimulus, the self is divided, placing the subject in what Tal terms a "liminal state," the condition of existing "between states, places, or conditions."[11] Analysis of the language of sound surrounding the liminal state illuminates the corruptive effect of traumatic sound on O'Brien's representations of memory and language, which in turn shows O'Brien's work to be an individualistic one, deeply pessimistic about the capability of trauma writing to yield positive change.

In chapter two I turn to the poem "Tu Do Street" from Yusef Komunyakaa's collection *Dien Cai Dau*. Komunyakaa is an African American veteran poet, whose writing about his experience in the war and back in the U.S challenges dominant perspectives on the American representation of trauma of the Vietnam war. I begin analysis of his poem using the abreactive model of trauma. However, I argue Komunyakaa's depiction of African American identity in poem renders the abreactive model irrelevant by eliminating the presence of the liminal state in the work. This poem's lack of a conception of a liminal state reflects Komunyakaa's larger concern with issues of racial division.

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[10] Kali Tal, "Speaking the Language of Pain: Vietnam War Literature in the Context of a Literature of Trauma," in *Fourteen Landing Zones: Approaches to Vietnam War Literature*, Iowa City: Iowa UP, 1991, 225.
[11] Eric J. Leed, *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War I*, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1979, 14.

In chapter three I turn to the short story "Black-Eyed Women" from the collection *The Refugees*, written by Viet Thanh Nguyen. Viet Thanh Nguyen, in addition to writing fiction, is one of the preeminent scholars within the field of Asian American Studies. His work as an Asian American studies scholar is woven deeply within his fiction. Through this short story I attempt to elaborate the objectives of trauma writing from an Asian American Studies perspective. The abreactive model of trauma remains relevant to the individual representations of trauma in this work. However, the larger emphasis of Nguyen's work is attention to cultural trauma. As theorized by Nguyen, cultural trauma assumes the form of the erasure of minority memory. Nguyen's fictional work is concerned with the ethical production of countermemory, or memory dissonant with the dominant national narrative.[12] In contrast to O'Brien's use of sound, Nguyen's use of silence enables his short story to function as a manifesto of sorts, educating his readers on how to ethically engage in the production of countermemory to combat the erasure of minority memory by the dominant American cultural narrative.

In the final chapter I investigate the poem "Aubade with Burning City" from the collection *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, written by Vietnamese American poet Ocean Vuong. I analyze this poem in the context of the theories of ethical production of countermemory which Nguyen both explicated and advocated for in his short story. I use Nguyen's framework to point out the thematic and critical intersection between these two works by Vietnamese Americans. I also return to Stein's psychoacoustic theories in this chapter, as my reading explores the ways in which the ability of sound to affect personal myth translates to music. I also draw on postcolonial theory to illustrate how music may be used as a tool of cultural erasure. Through the claim that music can be used a tool of cultural erasure, I argue that Vuong utilizes and subverts American

[12] Viet Thanh Nguyen, "Speak of the Dead, Speak of Vietnam: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Minority Discourse," *The New Centennial Review*, 6:2, 2006, 13.

music in order to disrupt and defy the dominant American cultural memory surrounding the fall of Saigon.

Contemporary literary trauma theory assumes a singular model of the post-traumatic psyche. These theoretical models are assumed to be universal, but as previously discussed, they are in reality culturally specific. Seeking to combat this ethnocentrism is an important task, as the desire of the dominant American narrative to erase the trauma of groups displaced by civil war and imperialist aggression is growing in tandem with the reintegration of white nationalism into mainstream society. In the face of these growing forces is imperative now to seek out and emphasize diverse representations of trauma.

Chapter 1: Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*: A Preoccupation with the Limits of Representation

Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* is one of the most important works to come out of American literatures of trauma of both the 20th and the 21st century. A.O. Scott writes in his essay, "Voicing Vietnam" that *The Things They Carried,* "has lived in the bellies of American readers for more than two decades" and claims "it sits on the narrow shelf of indispensable works by witnesses to and participants in the fighting."[13] Its importance to American Vietnam war literature and the broader American cultural understanding of the war make it a clear choice for analysis. Understanding the work as a widely significant literature of trauma, in this analysis I aim to utilize a very specified analysis of the language of sound and its interaction with the "personal myth" in order to illuminate a nuanced understanding of O'Brien and his relationship to his writing. I argue that through analysis of the language of gunfire within the eponymously named first chapter of the collection indicates the powerful corruptive effect of traumatic sound upon O'Brien's ability to create meaning in response to his surroundings. Analysis of O'Brien's presentation of his own memories illustrates sound's corruptive effect upon his understanding of the past, while analysis of O'Brien's metalinguistic reflections yields understanding of his psychological present. I argue these analyses will show O'Brien's writing to be deeply pessimistic, irreparably concerned by its own inability to allow its writer escape from repetitive visions of trauma.

Before delving into direct textual analysis, the various theoretical linkages detailed above need to be established. I will begin by exploring the concept of sound. It is intuitively understood

[13] Scott, A.O., "Voicing Vietnam," nytimes.com, https://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/24/books/review/tim-obriens-things-they-carried-read-by-bryan-cranston.html (Accessed March 11, 2019)

that sound is, by nature, ephemeral. In his essay "The Sound of Memory: Music and Acoustic Origins," Alexander Stein writes that sounds are "Made of compressions and vibrations of air, they are less easily preserved, recordings and other technologically mediated surrogates aside, than their visual counterparts."[14] Conceiving of sound as a materially transient phenomenon calls us to ask - how can sound have a lasting effect upon memory? Understanding memory as a place of relative permanence, as the "archives of personal history," seems to negate a possible connection between the two.[15] However, Stein argues that despite its transient physical nature sound has lasting psychological permanence. He writes,

> The kaleidoscope of archaic auditory impressions, perceptions, and audio-phonic interactions, together with the miasma of sounds and noises of the body, early surround, and primary relationships, remain audible across the chasms of time and space in the inner ear of imagination and memory, where the internalized voices and sounds of earliest life are permanently ensconced.[16]

In this passage Stein frames sound as significant to the formation of our base psychological character, arguing that the sounds that we hear in the earliest developmental stages echo across "the inner ear of imagination and memory," influencing character formation. Thus Stein argues that sound plays a vital role in psychological development and the formation of memory. This connection between sound, psychological development, and memory is imperative to have in mind as I now turn to exploring personal myth, another one of the key terms of this analysis.

Trauma theorist Kali Tal, in her essay "Speaking the Language of Pain: Vietnam War Literature in the Context of a Literature of Trauma," introduces the concept of personal myth,

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[14] Alexander Stein, "The Sound of Memory: Music and Acoustic Origins," *American Imago*, 64:1, 2007, 62.
[15] Stein, "The Sound of Memory," 61.
[16] *Ibid*, 62.

which is integral to my analysis of the effect of the language of traumatic sound. She defines personal myth as, "the particular set of explanations and expectations generated by an individual to account for his or her circumstances."[17] Via Stein, we can understand these explanations and expectations as generating, at least in part, from the "the kaleidoscope of archaic auditory impressions, perceptions, and audio-phonic interactions"[18] that characterize the early sonic environment. These expectations allow us to properly interact with and understand events that fall neatly into what are called "schemas". It is useful to conceptualize schemas as the classic children's toy in which squares, circles, or various other shapes are placed into their prescribed outlines on a board. When a life event does not fit into its prescribed outline (schema), dissonant aspects of the event are shaved off as it is forced into understanding. Tal writes, "The schemas operating in a particular situation determine the actual information an individual absorbs and interprets."[19] This "shaving" of dissonant feedback from the world is, in fact, an essential human coping strategy that results in the "trade-off of a distorted awareness for a sense of security."[20] But when the dissonance between the schema and the feedback is too great, the board breaks, the personal myth is "shattered." This concept of the "shattering" of identity is a crucial piece of the "abreactive model of trauma." Balaev provides a succinct explanation of this model in her work, "Trends in Literary Trauma Theory:" "The idea that traumatic experience divides identity is employed by the literary scholar as a metaphor to describe the degree of damage done to the individual's coherent sense of self and the change of consciousness caused by the experience. For this reason, I refer to the employment of the abreactive model in literary criticism as the

[17] Kali Tal, "Speaking the Language of Pain: Vietnam War Literature in the Context of a Literature of Trauma," in *Fourteen Landing Zones: Approaches to Vietnam War Literature,* Iowa City: Iowa UP, 1991, 225.
[18] Stein, "The Sound of Memory," 62.
[19] Tal, "Speaking the Language of Pain, 225.
[20] *Ibid*.

shattering trope."[21] The most relevant aspect of this abreactive model to my analysis is the so-called division of identity, which is according to Tal places the trauma victim in a "liminal state."

Tal argues that after the shattering of the personal myth, the victim is in a liminal state, "is between states, places, or conditions."[22] This definition of liminality derives from anthropologist Arnold van Gennep, who uses it to describe rituals and rites. However, Eric J. Leeds' *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War I* provides the theoretical linkage between liminality and combat. Leed claims, "The figure of the veteran is a subcategory of what might be called 'the liminal type.' He derives all of his features from the fact that he has crossed the boundaries of disjunctive social worlds, from peace to war, and back."[23] Thus this liminal state is the consequence of traumatic experience. It effectively functions as a purgatory. The traumatized individual is unable to return regain their pre-trauma personal myth and can never return to the environment in which their traumatized personal myth was formed. Thus the liminal state leaves the veteran without schemas through which to understand their world.

I have established linkages between sound and personal myth, illustrating that the processing of sound is crucial to the subsequent development of personal myth. I also have established that personal myth may be broken through the trauma of war. I have yet to explore how sound may impact the psyche independent of the development of personal myth. According to Stein, sounds are unique in the way they defy relational definition - they are abstract and disembodied, and "they may emanate from some unseen or unseeable force."[24] The way they defy our ability to understand them in relation to the other catalyzes "an imaginative or

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[21] Michelle Balaev, "Trends in Literary Trauma Theory," *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, 41:2, 2008, 149.
[22] Eric J. Leed, *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War I*, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1979, 14.
[23] *Ibid*, 194.
[24] Stein, Sound of Memory, 62.

fantastical construction that endeavors to give sounds (or their source) form, shape, and comprehensibility."[25] Stein argues this imaginative reaching is vital to psychological development. He writes,

> This process of the transformation of sound into meaning is elemental to human existence and has far-reaching psychological consequences. Perhaps paramount is the development of the imaginative mind—the capacity to symbolize and to extract and exchange signs from sounds bearing communicative and affective significance.[26]

Here Stein is suggesting that our processing of sound is crucial to how we relationally understand the world from moment to moment. Thus the aggregate of this process, the transforming if sound into meaning, which occurs countless times throughout each day, determines the ability to relate to the environment. Each sound one hears shapes the way in which one will respond to next environmental stimulus. Thus a traumatic sound has the capacity to radically change the way in which one interacts with their environment. Yet intuitively it seems that a myriad of other sensory factors, like seeing, speaking, touching, contribute to one's relationship to one's environment and the development of personal myth. Why does sound have such power to impact the personal myth?

The unique power which sound holds over the psyche originates from the physical mechanics by which we hear. Stein writes,

> Of signal importance is that the ear and allied physical pathways of audition are never closed. The eyes can be shut or averted at will to block or obscure visual stimuli; the nasal passages can be pinched, and olfactory intake suspended or filtered by controlled inhalation. By contrast, the physical processes of hearing are outside conscious control.

[25] *Ibid*, 62-63.
[26] *Ibid*, 63.

Thus sound is a clear point of vulnerability in one's perceptual armor; unwanted sounds easily pierce both our physical and mental defenses. The ease with which sound can pierce these physical defenses contributes to the ease with which it influences our perception. Due to our physical and mental vulnerability, sound can drastically change our perception of and interaction with our environment. Yet the extraction of meaning from the environment is done subconsciously, and thus is largely inaccessible for analysis. However, the expression of this extraction is conscious, and is often done through writing.

This offers an angle of analysis for approaching O'Brien's text. We will first examine a scene which illustrates the powerful destabilizing effect of traumatic sound upon the psyche. O'Brien writes,

> For the most part they carried themselves with poise, a kind of dignity. Now and then, however, there were times of panic, when they squealed or wanted to squeal but couldn't, when they twitched and made moaning sounds and covered their heads and said Dear Jesus and flopped around on the earth and fired their weapons blindly and cringed and sobbed and begged for the noise to stop and went wild and made stupid promises to themselves and to God and to their mothers and fathers, hoping not to die.[27]

Notice how the idea of a liminal state is immediately raised. The soldiers alternate between "a kind of dignity" and "times of panic." Importantly, it is not purely dignity, but a kind. This suggests a teetering, a middle ground which the soldier inhabits, balancing between poise and panic. What pulls the soldiers down from their careful wrought balance is noise. It is interaction with the environment that cannot be ignored. This passage is largely concerned with physical control. As we begin to read through the excerpt, it is important to keep in mind our discussion of the physical power of sound, and our lack of ability to defend ourselves against it. Each of the noise verbs is associated with lack of control - squealing and not being able to, twitching,

[27] Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1990, 18.

flopping. These verbs also carry with them dehumanizing characteristics - squeal like a pig, flop like a fish. In these moments the soldiers were forced to relinquish their control over themselves and their brains - they became animals. This physiological change is not the most significant aspect, however. The paragraph builds in intensity as the sentence continues without punctuation. The climax of the sentence is the result of their reduction to animals, as they make "stupid promises to themselves and to God and to their mothers and fathers." These promises symbolize the relational change that these soldiers undergo during these traumatic experiences. These three entities - the self, God, and the family - encapsulate the personal myth as represented by O'Brien. The self represents how the relationship between the self and the idea of self - how the individual understands them self in relation to the world. The parents embody the soldier's relational understanding of other human beings. And finally, God embodies the soldier's relational understanding of culture itself. And the soldier is forced to renegotiate his relationship with each of these entities, which in aggregate contain the entirety of the schemas that he has used to understand the world. Analyzing this excerpt while focusing on the diction of sound illustrates its deconstructive effect, as it breaks down the soldier's ability to relate to themselves and others. Equally important to investigate are O'Brien's representations of the soldier's efforts to cope with the remnants of psychological trauma.

In the text following the firefight we will see two separate modes of recovery. There is a physiological recovery, as heartbeats and blood pressure and the body return to normal. And there is also psychological recovery. Investigation of the interaction between these disparate recoveries will allow us to understand the soldier's journey into the liminal state, as they negotiate their environments after the deconstruction of their personal myths. O'Brien writes, "As if in slow motion, frame by frame, the world would take on the old logic - absolute silence,

then the wind, then sunlight, then voices. It was the burden of being alive. Awkwardly, the men would reassemble themselves, first in private, then in groups, becoming soldiers again."[28] The men have been stripped of their schemas. They no longer have means to interpret their place in the world. This is indicated by how immediately after the firefight, they experience only "absolute silence." Next the men's capacity to hear returns last, after sensation and sight. This works cogently with our understanding of the interpretation of sound as essential to "the capacity to symbolize and to extract and exchange signs from sounds bearing communicative and affective significance." The act of hearing carries the most psychological significance - the men's very capacity to understand their surroundings has been deconstructed through traumatic sound. Therefore, their capacity to hear requires the most repair. This is indeed "the burden of being alive" - being forced to process the stimulus of the world. The psychological recovery parallels the psychological deconstruction. The "private" reconstruction parallels the "promises to themselves," the "group" reconstruction parallels the promises to "mothers and fathers," and the reconstruction of their identity as "soldiers" parallels the promises "to God." It is difficult to elucidate what exactly this "reconstruction" entails from this passage, except that it parallels the deconstruction of the personal myth. But what are the consequences of this reconstruction? Following reconstruction soldiers enter into a liminal state - in between what they were and what they will be. The remnants of liminality are littered throughout the text - we will first investigate a flashback excerpt to explore how the effects of liminality permeate through memory.

Previously I established that traumatic encounters lead to the radical deconstruction and subsequent partial reconstruction of personal myth. We used Stein's psychoacoustic theory and Tal's trauma theory to argue that hearing, due to its supreme importance to the formation of

[28] O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*, 18.

interpretive schemas and unique vulnerability to environmental input, is an important avenue by which trauma impacts the psyche. As we worked through the language of the traumatic firefight scene, we saw that the overwhelming traumatic stimuli resulted in a psychological loss of control that forced the deconstruction and subsequent renegotiation of several aspects of the personal myth. Through Tal's work with liminality, we know that the post-trauma reconstruction of the personal myth is incomplete. What are the consequences of this incomplete reconstruction, specifically psychological consequences? I will examine Lieutenant Cross' flashback to illuminate how the shattering of personal myth affects the traumatized subject's conception of his past self.

O'Brien writes,

> A dark theater, he remembered, and the movie was *Bonnie and Clyde*, and Martha wore a tweed skirt, and during the final scene, when he touched her knee, she turned and looked at him in a sad, sober way that made him pull his hand back, but he would always remember the feel of the tweed skirt and the knee beneath it and the sound of the gunfire that killed Bonnie and Clyde, how embarrassing it was, how slow and oppressive. He remembered kissing her good night at the dorm room door. Right then, he thought, he should've done something brave. He should've carried her up the stairs to her room and tied her to the bed and touched that left knee all night long. He should've risked it. Whenever he looked at the photographs, he thought of new things he should've done.[29]

What is most striking is how Lieutenant Cross seems remembers this scene with great certainty. Here, the writing seems more focused on the act of remembering than the actual memory itself.

[29] *Ibid*, 14.

Notice that almost immediately O'Brien emphasizes that this is a memory and an act of remembering by Cross. This simple declaration, "he remembered," sets up the rest of the line as support for the accuracy of Cross's memory. The repeated dependent clauses, beginning with "and," lend the section a sense of earnest, breathless desperation, as if Cross is eager to prove he truly does remember Martha and their time together. O'Brien suggests his earnest faith in his memory as uncorrupted is belied by the reality. Here I emphasize the piece of the memory that concludes the recollection to illustrate the corruption of Cross's memory. Specifically, it is a recollection of traumatic sound. The three words he uses to describe it are embarrassing, slow, and oppressive. These descriptors reflect, nearly exactly, the loss of control the soldiers experienced during the traumatic incident we analyzed previously. "Slow" and "oppressive" indicate the control that the traumatic sound takes over Cross. Cross is desperate for it to end, but it seems to go one forever. He is almost pinned underneath its grasp, oppressed by it. And thus it is embarrassing - Cross loses control to the traumatic sound. He is dominated by it and cannot escape it. And so Cross remembers this past incident through his current frame of reference. We see here the psychological echoes of his trauma rippling *backwards* through his psyche, distorting his memories.

The end of the passage in which Cross is fantasizing about Martha illuminates even more clearly how his trauma affects his recollections. When one looks past Cross's romantic aspirations, it is clear this is really a fantasy in which Cross is a good soldier, unaffected by the trauma of war. Notice how he wants to do something "brave," not romantic. The word brave has a very close association with masculinity and violence. And in fact, the fantasy is a fantasy of violence and control! It is slightly masked by the diction - the slightly romantic imagery of "carried her up the stairs" and the metonymic phrase "touched that left knee all night long." But

if we look past these disguises, we can see that Cross wishes that he had the courage to rape Martha - to take away her control, as he has had his taken from him. Memory is a deeply important aspect of the psych, but the relational portion - how we relate to our environment through schemas - is equally significant. In investigating this aspect of the personal schema, I want to examine the language used by the soldiers. It is their own words that reflect in O'Brien's narrative how these soldiers relate to their world.

The narrator frequently offers their own opinion about the soldier's dialogue. This meta-awareness of language - the narrator's analyzing of the soldier's language despite existing as a soldier on the page - provides depth to the text that we will return to later. O'Brien writes,

> They used a hard vocabulary to contain the terrible softness. *Greased* they'd say. *Offed, lit up, zapped while zipping.* It wasn't cruelty, just stage presence. They were actors. When someone died, it wasn't quite dying, because in a curious way it seemed scripted, and because they had their lines mostly memorized, irony mixed with tragedy, and because they called it by other names, as if to encyst and destroy the reality of death itself. [30]

It is useful to conceptualize of interpretive schemas as making up a protective shell that allow difficult psychological/sensory input to be processed without too much damage. But after these schemas have been destroyed by traumatic stimulus, their protective ability is lost. This passage is a case study in how the soldiers have adapted to exist without the protection these personal schemas provide. The diction of the first line of the excerpt supports our conceptualization of the personal schema as a protective shell. The "softness" is the self without the personal schema. They use language as a substitute for a personal schema. But notice it does not have the same effect. It does not allow input in. It is not even a method for interpreting the outside world, but rather a means of *containment*. Their language has been corrupted. While it

[30] *Ibid*, 19.

was previously a means of communicating with and interpreting the outside world, it has been co-opted as a protective measure, and as a result the soldiers have lost the ability to relationally understand their world as the non-traumatized would. “It wasn’t cruelty, just stage presence.” As actors, they have lost the ability to authentically relate to their world. They are living in a liminal state. They are disassociated from both themselves and the outside world. Their words contain their “terrible softness” but “when someone died, it wasn’t quite dying.” They know neither themselves nor the world in which they live. After the personal schema is destroyed, language becomes a primary defense mechanism, a means of “destroying the reality of death itself,” and this corruption of language leaves soldiers without a means to understand themselves or the world in which they inhabit.

Repetition is a second key aspect to the corruption of language that O’Brien depicts to illustrate the effect of trauma on American veterans of the Vietnam war. He writes,

> There it is, they’d say. Over and over -- there it is, my friend, there it is -- as if the repetition itself were an act of poise, a balance between crazy and almost crazy, knowing without going, there it is, which meant be cool, let it ride, because Oh yeah, man you can’t change what can’t be changed, there it is, there it absolutely and positively and fucking well is.[31]

Analysis of this passage will demonstrate that again language has become an act of survival. Notice how in the beginning of the passage the narrator denotes when he is quoting the soldiers. He either says “they’d say,” or uses dashes to show that it is them, not him, speaking. But as the passage continues the narrator seems to get caught up in the repetition. He no longer takes care to note when he is quoting, and the sentence is a run-on, with a capitalized word in the middle of the sentence. It dawns on the reader that perhaps the narrator is caught up themselves, trying to balance between “crazy and almost crazy.” The repetition of “there it is” is, according to Caruth,

[31] *Ibid*, 20.

is "at the heart of catastrophe – the experience that Freud will call 'traumatic neurosis' – emerges as the unwitting reenactment of an event one can simply not leave behind."[32] Thus this repetition signifies the acknowledgement of trauma's seemingly inescapable nature. It is an explicit acknowledgement of what we have seen implicitly suggested through this text: that trauma corrupts memory and language, the past and the future.

O'Brien repeats this explicit affirmation of the inescapable nature of trauma within the language of the soldier's daydreams. This affirmation again lies within the language of sound. O'Brien writes, "they were taken up over the clouds and the war, beyond duty, beyond gravity and mortification and global entanglements - *Sin loi!*, they yelled. *I'm sorry, mother fuckers, but I'm out of it, I'm goofed, I'm on a space cruise, I'm gone!*-"[33] This initial series of descriptions signifies the soldier's reassertion of control over their environment. I am most interested in the dialogue that accompanies this retaking of control. The soldiers are yelling, a show of dominance. The dialogue is also placed in italics, which is a departure from earlier dialogue in the text. Previously I noted that language was being used as a defense mechanism, a means of masking the true nature of events. I renamed this masking as a type of liminality in which the soldiers could comprehend neither themselves nor the environment around them. In the previous section, the phrases used as substitutes for "killed" increased in obliqueness as the passage went on. "*Offed, lit up, zapped while zipping.*"[34] In this section, the opposite occurs. As the soldiers retake control of their environment, the phrases become less and less oblique, beginning with "*sin loi,"* a phrase in a different language, moving to "*I'm out of it*," then to "*I'm goofed*," and finally culminating with the straightforward "*I'm gone!*"

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[32] Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996, 2.
[33] O'Brien, 22.
[34] *Ibid*, 19.

O'Brien imagines a world in which soldiers are able to retake control of their environment and their language, thereby escaping the liminal state and regaining the capacity to relate to themselves and their environment. But key to this scenario is that it is imagined. The validity of this scenario is undermined by the concluding sentence of the paragraph, which reads "- and so at night, not quite dreaming, they gave themselves over to lightness, they were carried, they were purely borne."[35] This fantasy scene originates from a liminal space, when the soldiers are *not quite dreaming*. If they were truly dreaming the fantasy would be liberating in some modality. But they are hovering between reality and fantasy, and thus this wishful imagining is nothing but a continuation of their agonizing entrapment in this liminal state. This scene acts as a rejection of the notion that these soldiers are able to reclaim control over their environment and language. How does this rejection change the understanding of O'Brien's trauma writing? Lieutenant Cross's concluding musings on Martha, an American woman he is in love with, suggest possible interpretations.

O'Brien returns to the motif of daydreams as Lieutenant Cross ponders his relationship with Martha. Daydreams as a motif suggest a desire to control one's environment and escape liminal space. Describing Cross's deliberations on Martha, O'Brien writes,

> No more fantasies, he told himself.
> Henceforth, when he thought about Martha, it would be only to think that she belong elsewhere. He would shut out the daydreams. This was not Mount Sebastian, it was another world, where there were no pretty poems or midterm exams, a place where men died because of carelessness and gross stupidity.[36]

Again, O'Brien uses repetition in order to illustrate the inescapability of trauma. But where before it addressed the repetition of language as an act of balance, of staying sane, here it is

[35] *Ibid*, 22.
[36] *Ibid*, 23.

addressing the repetition of the daydream, the attempted escape from the liminal state. Understanding the repetitive return to the daydream as analogous to the repetitive return to trauma illustrates that Martha symbolizes Cross's trauma. She embodies Cross' separation from the world he once knew, the very traumatic separation that has divided his identity and placed him in this state.

A second key aspect of this passage are the associations that O'Brien makes between Martha and academia. As Cross resolves to "shut out" Martha, he also disparages "pretty poems" and "midterm exams," contrasting them with Vietnam, "a place where men died." The disdain Cross shows for these symbols of the arts represents the trauma writers frustration with their inability to accurately depict trauma, and with trauma's very nature, the way it "lies beyond the bounds of 'normal' conception."[37] This symbolic parallel illuminates Cross's symbolic role in this passage as a trauma writer, endlessly revisiting the source of his trauma to try to return to his pre-liminal state. Further analysis of these symbolic parallels will continue to illuminate O'Brien's role within his own text, which ultimately explicates his relationship with trauma writing.

The impression that that Cross had abandoned his love for Martha is continued till the conclusion of the chapter. O'Brien writes,

> He would dispense with love; it was now not a factor. And if anyone quarreled or complained, he would simply tighten his lips and arrange his shoulders in the correct command posture. He might give a curt little nod. Or he might not. He might just shrug and say, Carry on, and they would saddle up and form into a column and move out towards the villages west of Than Khe.[38]

[37] Kali Tal, "Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma," New York: Cambridge UP, 1996, 15.
[38] O'Brien, 25.

What is most significant in this passage is Cross' physical response to giving up Martha. It silences him! He is forced to "tighten his lips." At this point his trauma will have robbed him completely of his means of interacting with his environment. To be rendered silent by trauma is to be dead - for if we cannot interact with, speak to and with the world what are besides objects? O'Brien seems to share this sentiment - he leaves it up to the reader to judge if Cross in reality chooses to "tighten his lips." Or he might have, crucially, chosen to open his mouth to say "Carry on." That is to say, carry on working through the trauma, striving to understand and grieve and to heal through pretty poems.

Cross is shown to be struggling between the endless revisiting of the traumatic stimulus or a silence, isolation. This predicament is characteristic of the writer of trauma. This sort of tortured circling resurfaces again and again throughout the collection. Take, for example, Norman Bowker's repetitive circling of a lake which preceeds his eventual suicide in the chapter "Speaking of Courage."[39] David Jarraway writes in his article "Excremental Assault" in Tim O'Brien: Trauma and Recovery in Vietnam War Literature," "But Bowker's endless circling also brings round once again both the self-preserving and the self-denying forms of recovery at the very catastrophic center of the literature of witness."[40] *The Things They Carried* is the product of a man struggling to escape the traumatic drain that swallowed his comrade Norman Bowker. Trauma writing, for O'Brien, is a paradoxical exercise. Do you continue to revisit the trauma and articulate it in new ways that may provide some solace? But this very same revisiting ultimately acts as a reopening of a wound. Or do you stay silent, and let the trauma build in the mind until it consumes you, as it consumed Bowker. O'Brien's writing paints an ambivalent portrait of his

[39] O'Brien, 131.
[40] David R. Jarraway, "'Excremental Assault' in Tim O'Brien: Trauma and Recovery in Vietnam War Literature," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 44:3, 1998, 706.

relationship with writing. He remarked in an interview published several years after the release of *The Things They Carried* that his intention was "to stop writing fiction for the foreseeable future."[41] Examining the impact of traumatic sound upon the memory and language of Lieutenant Cross illuminated a deeply cynical perspective on the ability of writing to provide an escape from the "traumatic neurosis" which defines the compulsively repetitive nature of traumatic memory. I doubt that O'Brien's choice to stop writing was due to a successful reimagining of trauma that put him at peace.

[41] Tim O'Brien, Interview, "Doing the Popular Thing," *The New York Times Book Review*," 9 Oct. 1994, 33.

Chapter 2: Yusef Komunyakaa's "Tu Do Street:" The Artificiality of Racial Division

In this chapter I turn to the collection of Vietnam war poetry *Dien Cai Dau*, written by African American veteran Yusef Komunyakaa. Recognition of the productive differences between O'Brien, Komunyakaa and their work will produce an angle through which to begin analysis of Komunyakaa's poem "Tu Do Street." Komunyakaa's representation of racial identity, forces the reevaluation of the trauma theory that I used to analyze O'Brien's work. Critic Alvin Aubert wrote, regarding the effects of the racism Komunyakaa experienced upon his poetry, that his poems are "his push for the completion of his humanity."[42] I argue that Komunyakaa's experience growing up in a segregated South renders the abreactive model of trauma, which I used in my analysis of O'Brien, to be inapplicable to his work. I will support this claim by showing the lack of liminal space in the poem, an important aspect of the abreactive model of trauma ubiquitous within O'Brien's work. This lack of liminal space is manifested in the poem by the way Komunyakaa's experience of racial trauma in wartime Vietnam, in what should be a racially neutral environment, parallels his experience of racial trauma in the segregated South. This parallel exposes the artificiality of cultural difference. Komunyakaa uses the motifs of sexual desire and death to contrast artificial cultural with the unifying biological equivalence of all humans to stake "his claim for unqualified status in the human race."[43]

[42] Alvin Aubert, "Yusef Komunyakaa: The Unified Vision – Canonization and Humanity," *African American Review*, 27:1, 1993, 119.
[43] *Ibid*.

The title of the poem immediately alerts us to the racial divisions which define it. "Tu Do"[44] puns on the phrase "two door street," indicating the presence of multiple racial spaces within one physical.[45] We can conceptualize of these "racial spaces" as products of the interaction between nature and culture. Giddens writes that "In all forms of society, human beings exist in *contradictory relation to nature*. Human beings exist in contradictory relation to nature because they are in and of nature...and yet at the same time they are set of against nature, as having a 'second nature' of their own, irreducible to physical objects or events."[46] Humans are unified by their shared physical being, by the simple fact that each human is objectively biologically equivalent. They are divided by their manufactured "second nature," the product of sociocultural factors that lead to the development of a distinct personal myth independent of the biological reality of the body. This dichotomous relationship provides a framework for understanding the rest of the poem.

I will now move to illustrate the lack of liminal space within the poem. The next lines read,

> I close my eyes & can see
> men drawing lines in the dust.
> America pushes through the membrane
> of mist & smoke, & I'm a small boy
> again in Bogalusa. *White only*[47]

The phrase "I close my eyes" indicates a mental flashback to the time of Komunyakaa's childhood in Bogalusa. This taken in the context of the title, a Vietnamese street name, indicates

[44] Yusef Komunyakaa, "Tu Do Street," in *Dien Cai Dau*, Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan UP, 2012, 29.
[45] Alvin Aubert, "The Unified Vision," 122.
[46] Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure, and Contradiction in Social Analysis*, Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1979, 114.
[47]Komunyakaa, "Tu Do Street," 29.

the narrative present is wartime Vietnam. These lines thus integrate fluidly the narrator's past in Bogalusa and the present in wartime Vietnam. The first two lines' emphasis on divisions echoes the representations of trauma in O'Brien's work, as we looked at the division between America and wartime Vietnam and the effect of this division on the psyche: the liminal state. The similarity ends by the subsequent lines. The difference between wartime Vietnam and America collapses as "America pushes through the membrane/of mist and smoke." Here is where we see the predictions of the abreactive model of trauma fail. This model would suggest that America and wartime Vietnam be represented as entirely disparate, as it is this traumatic difference that causes the "shattering" at the heart of the abreactive model. Yet within Komunyakaa's work they seem to blend together without difficulty or conflict. I will now discuss the abreactive model of trauma in order to explain how it is disrupted by Komunyakaa's racial identity.

In the previous chapter I relied heavily on this "abreactive model of trauma," which claims that "traumatic experience produces a 'temporal gap' and a dissolution of the self."[48] Tal argues that this "dissolution of the self," or shattering of personal myth, places the soldier into a liminal state, a psychological state characterized by its dearth of organizational schemas which are used to interpret the environment.[49] However, as I previously mentioned, Komunyakaa's identity forces a reevaluation of the value of the application of this trauma theory to his work.

Growing up as an African American in a segregated South suggests that Komunyakaa may have experienced both direct racial trauma during this time and what Balaev terms "transhistorical trauma." She writes, "The theory indicates that a massive trauma experienced by

[48] Michelle Balaev, "Trends in Literary Trauma Theory," *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*

[49] Kali Tal, "Speaking the Language of Pain: Vietnam War Literature in the Context of a Literature of Trauma," in *Fourteen Landing Zones: Approaches to Vietnam War Literature,* Iowa City: Iowa UP, 1991, 226.

a group in the historical past can be experienced by an individual living centuries later who shares a similar attribute of the historical group, such as sharing the same race, religion, nationality, or gender…"[50] This theory is used often in relation to race; Balaev writes "The conceptualization of the connection between trauma experienced by an individual versus that experienced by a group works within a larger debates regarding identity formation, especially racial identity formation."[51] I argue that the likely frequent psychological trauma of physical and cultural segregation and isolation in combination with the transhistorical trauma of the institution of slavery in North America had the effect of placing Komunyakaa into a persistently liminal state.

The concept of the liminal state is based on the existence of a solid personal myth grounded by mature understandings (schemas) of how to relate to the self, the world, and others. Once this personal myth is shattered, and these schemas are disrupted, a liminal state is formed. However, I argue that if an individual is consistently exposed to direct racial discrimination and to transhistorical trauma, they will not form a solid personal myth, grounded in mature schemas. These schemas will constantly be disrupted, the personal myth constantly under psychological attack from both present and past traumas. I argue that this constant disruption has the effect of placing Komunyakaa in a persistently liminal state without firmly set schemas, which allows the disparate environments of the United States and Vietnam to blend together without the "shattering" prescribed the abreactive model which expects the subject to enter a traumatic environment with a strong, entrenched personal myth. "Tu Do Street" is a poem written by a veteran about wartime Vietnam. The presence of a shattering trauma and the subsequent liminal state is therefore expected. Thus the absence of the liminal state defies the predictions of the

[50] Balaev, "Trends in Literary Trauma Theory," 150.
[51] *Ibid*, 151.

abreactive model of trauma, indicating it cannot be applied to Komunyakaa's work. The failure of this model to accurately predict the literary elements within Komunyakaa's poem illustrate its cultural limitations and the "whiteness" of O'Brien's literary representation of trauma. I will now analyze the manifestation of this lack of the liminal state, the parallels between Komunyakaa's experience of racial trauma in Bogalusa and wartime Vietnam, in order to illuminate the artificiality of cultural difference.

As I previously argued, this lack of liminality is expressed through Komunyakaa's parallel experience with racial trauma in Bogalusa and wartime Vietnam. The persistence of racial trauma in a culturally neutral space illuminates the artificiality of cultural division. I will now return to the beginning of the poem to begin my analysis of the manifestations of this lack of liminality. As I previously established, "I close my eyes" indicates that the image of "men drawing lines in the dust" is relevant to both the past and the present. The imagery of "drawing lines in the dust" recalls both the segregation of the South and the division of America and Vietnam and GI and Viet Cong. Thus the speaker begins to draw attention to the parallels between their experience with racism in the deep south and warfare in Vietnam. These parallels are fleshed out more completely in the coming lines. Komunyakaa writes,

> again in Bogalusa. *White Only*
> signs & Hank Snow. But tonight
> I walk into a place where bar girls
> fade like tropical birds. When
> I order a beer, the mama-san
> behind the counter acts as if she
> can't understand, while her eyes
> skirt each white face, as Hank Williams
> calls from the psychedelic jukebox.[52]

[52] Komunyakaa, "Tu Do Street," 29.

In characterizing his upbringing in Bogalusa Komunyakaa uses two descriptors: "*White Only*/signs," which invokes spatial segregation and "Hank Snow," a white country singer, which refers to cultural segregation. The next line describes an exotic bar, far removed from America, that should contain none of the racial division which characterizes the segregated South. Komunyakaa begins the line with the word "But," which is typically used to indicate contrast. Komunyakaa emphasizes the foreignness of the bar with exotic diction, characterizing the bar girls as tropical birds. The verb he uses to describe their movement is exotic as well – they do not walk away, but rather "fade," like some alien beings. Yet despite the objective difference, racial division is still present. Although the bar girls are exotic like "tropical birds," and they "fade," rather than walk away, they are still unavailable to Komunyakaa due to his race, just as they would have been in Bogalusa. Komunyakaa continues to use exotic diction to contrast the different setting with the familiar outcome. Although it is a "mama-san" serving the drinks, a Vietnamese woman who should be ignorant of the cultural divisions of America, the outcome is the same as it would have been in Bogalusa: she too rejects his patronage. Komunyakaa uses the last two lines of the excerpt to illustrate the artificiality of the transplantation of American culture, and thus American racism and cultural difference, into Vietnam.

Although the bar is in Vietnam, nearly the same music is being played as was in Bogalusa. The similarity of the names Hank Williams and Hank Snow emphasize this similarity. The description of the "psychedelic jukebox" emphasizes the incongruousness Hank Williams and of general 1960's American culture transplanted into a Vietnamese bar. Komunyakaa draws attention to that fact that these cultural elements have been transplanted artificially from America into Vietnam, in order to highlight that racism functions in the same way. It is not an inherent part of human nature, but rather a manufactured cultural element that can be transplanted into a

disparate cultural setting, like Hank Williams or a psychedelic jukebox. Although Komunyakaa pointedly illuminates the artificiality of cultural division by showing the way that racism has been artificially transplanted from America to wartime Vietnam, his tone is not characterized by anger or resentment. On the contrary, he is eager to allocate blame to both races in order to begin to break down cultural division.

Komunyakaa here allocates blame for continued racial division to both African Americans and white Americans. He writes,

> We have played Judas where
> only machine-gun fire brings us
> together. Down the street
> black GIs hold to their turf also.[53]

Komunyakaa's use of the pronoun "We" in the first line is a departure from the diction of the poem up this point. It is unclear for a moment who this "we" refers to, but the final line, with its reference to the black GIs holding "to their turf also," illustrates the "we" refers to both African and white Americans. This inclusivity shares the blame for cultural division. Komunyakaa's diction illustrates that he views cultural division as a construct. He invokes the word "play" which carries connotations of both immaturity and pretending. By referencing Judas, Komunyakaa accuses both racial groups as acting as traitors to humanity. He accuses both African and white Americans of falling into the trap of cultural division, only brought together by the ultimate unifier: machine-gun fire, which is to say, death. Komunyakaa expands his accusation to include both racial parties explicitly in the following line, as he accuses the black GIs of holding "to their turf also." Thus although Komunyakaa uses his parallel experiences with racial trauma in the United States and wartime Vietnam to illustrate the artificiality of cultural

[53] *Ibid.*

difference, he allocates the blame for this distance to both races. This functions as the rhetorical beginning of Komunyakaa's argument for the equality of African and white Americans.

In the following lines Komunyakaa emphasizes the power of sexual desire to overcome cultural difference. He writes,

> An off-limits sign pulls me
> deeper into alleys, as I look
> for a softness behind these voices
> wounded by their beauty & war.
> Back in the bush at Dak To
> & Khe Sanh, we fought
> the brothers of these women
> we now run to hold in our arms.[54]

Here "softness" serves as metaphor for the exclusively natural or sexual. Softness is a purely physical quality, uncorrupted by the effects of culture. Although these voices have been marked by war, a product of cultural difference, the speaker still desires this softness, their natural biological sex. The remainder of the stanza is used to emphasize the improbability of the triumph of sexual desire over the immense cultural division present within a warzone. The next lines emphasize the overwhelming power of cultural difference in this setting. "Back in the bush" serves to emphasize the physical and psychological proximity of the soldiers to an environment dominated by physical violence predicated on cultural difference. The inclusion of the Vietnamese city names also emphasizes the cultural division by highlighting the geographic unfamiliarity of the setting to Americans. Finally, Komunyakaa uses a verb which straightforwardly signifies physical violence as the final rhetorical thrust which emphasizes the immense of power of cultural difference in a warzone. These descriptors of the power of cultural difference clash with the final line of this excerpt. This lines illustrates the GIs ignoring this vast

[54] *Ibid.*

cultural difference, exacerbated by geographical unfamiliarity and wartime violence, in order to satisfy their desire for intimacy and sexual release.

In the final lines of the poem, Komunyakaa illuminates the way this willingness to overlook cultural difference in the name of sexual release extends across races. He also introduces the parallel universality of death, the greatest unifier. Komunyakaa uses the power of these two unifiers over both races to argue for their equivalence. He writes,

> There's more than a nation
> inside us, as black & white
> soldiers touch the same lovers
> minutes apart, tasting
> each other's breath
> without knowing these rooms
> run into each other like tunnels
> leading into the underworld.

Komunyakaa explicitly rails against the dominant national myth when he writes, "there's more than a nation/inside us." He is arguing that the white Americans and African Americans do not have to prescribe to the national myth of cultural division, the myth that white Americans and African Americans are unequal. Komunyakaa is making a grand, abstract argument here when he argues for the existence of a common humanity outside of the cultural products of nationhood. He recognizes the inaccessible intangibility of this concept, and so returns to the intimate detail of touch and taste to link the two races. Komunyakaa emphasizes the paradoxical transience of touch and taste. These physical sensations are simultaneously the most powerful things humans feel and desire, and the most transient. Despite their power as some of the greatest motivators of the human race, there is no trace of a touch or taste left after the sensation has gone - and this allows the believe that our desire for touch and taste, which in this case signifies the desire for sexual intimacy, is unique to the race of the beholder, alone. Komunyakaa juxtaposes

the deeply intimate, personal nature of these desires with their universality as a rhetorical strategy to shock the reader into comprehending the objective sameness of the desires of the human race. For all of their differences, the segregation, and the hatred, their desires still have led them to *taste the same breath*, an incredibly intimate act. Komunyakaa first establishes this illuminating commonality between the races on the small scale of sensation. Now that he has established this framework, he is able to expand it, and the scope of the poem itself. With the line "without knowing these rooms" Komunyakaa emphasizes an intimacy that emerges among racially divided GIs unwittingly. Komunyakaa uses the last two lines of the poem to lend more weight to his rhetoric of commonality.

The previous lines convey a lightheartedness in the comparisons, as the men "run to hold [the women] in our arms." The tone sobers towards the poem's end, and there is dark wistfulness about these last lines. Komunyakaa invokes both birth and death: "tunnels/leading into the underworld" can be seen both as describing the hallways leading into the "underworld" of prostitution, or the physical tunnel that precedes birth. It also recalls the dark tunnels of the jungle that led so many GIs, black and white, to their death. Komunyakaa mixes these images of the beginning and the end to illustrate the ultimate commonality between the two races: the certainty of the sameness of birth and death.

Komunyakaa responds to the racial trauma of his childhood by highlighting the irony of racial divisions persisting in situations that bring to light the commonality of individual's desires, origins, and ends. The racial trauma that Komunyakaa experienced throughout his childhood precluded the formation of a coherent personal myth of self and nation, which O'Brien's fiction depicts for its white veteran. The specific parallels Komunyakaa draws between his childhood experience and Vietnam suggested that the trauma of Vietnam was in actuality already familiar,

allowing Komunyakaa's poem to escape from the circular trap of liminality that O'Brien writes in by virtue of having only existed within a liminal state. This illuminates a crucial difference in the writing of O'Brien and Komunyakaa. O'Brien's is cynical literature, focused on personal salvation. It mourns its own inability to conquer trauma. Komunyakaa does not revisit the past over and over in attempt to change it. He instead looks towards the future. Komunyakaa utilizes his unique perspective to act as an impartial figure in the poem, weaving poetry and rhetorical argument together beautifully to argue for his undisputed humanity, and the equality of all races in birth and in death.

Chapter 3: Viet Thanh Nguyen's "Black-Eyed Women:" An Empowering Manifesto

The end of my analysis of Komunyakaa indicated that his work differed from O'Brien's in its reaching past the self. O'Brien's work illustrated a despairing trauma writing, while Komunyakaa's was an ambitious in its scope and its optimism. Viet Thanh Nguyen's work, *The Refugees,* is characterized by similar ambition. I now turn to the first story in Viet Thanh Nguyen's collection *The Refugees.* "Black-Eyed Women" is a passionate opening piece that despite its fire is a story motivated by devotion to the ethics of remembering. Kali Tal indicates that remembering, or in her words, "the urge to bear witness,"[55] is a central factor which motivates a literature of trauma. But to Nguyen it is not an urge, but a political and ethical imperative. The consequences are far greater. For him, literature of trauma expands past the conundrum of redefining a traumatized identity. Nguyen writes, "much of the writing, art, and politics of Vietnamese refugees, is about the problem of mourning the dead, remembering the missing, and considering the place of survivors in the movement of history."[56] It is a question of how to process collective trauma – a trauma that threatens to sweep the entire Asian American identity under the rug of hegemonic history. Nguyen writes, "Countermemory is fundamental to Asian Americans as we stake our claim to America and to Asia."[57] Nguyen is hyper-conscious of the weight of his identity and the importance of the memory he creates through literature – he

[55] Kali Tal, "Speaking the Language of Pain: Vietnam War Literature in the Context of a Literature of Trauma, In *Fourteen Landing Zones: Approaches to Vietnam War Literature,* edited by Philip K. Jason, 217, Iowa City: Iowa UP, 1991.
[56] Viet Thanh Nguyen, "Speak of the Dead, Speak of Viet Nam: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Minority Discourse," *The New Centennial Review,* 6:2, 2006, 8.
[57] Nguyen, "Speak of the Dead," 13.

understands that, in the words of Nguyen-Vo Thu-Huong, "Remembering is a political and ethical choice."[58]

The first story in this collection concerns a refugee woman who immigrated to the U.S. during a time of conflict. She witnessed the death of her brother during her immigration, an experience that continues to haunt her. I argue that her brother's ghost symbolizes her unassimilated trauma, which acts as a barrier between her and the outside world, keeping her in "that bottomless well within myself that I had sealed with concrete."[59] She is muzzled by her trauma, rendered silent and unable to communicate with others, which leaves her physically and emotionally sick. I argue that through analysis of the motifs of silence and sickness we will see that Nguyen weaves careful theory and powerful rhetoric in order to create a manifesto that calls Asian American refugees to join Nguyen in his quest for the production of ethical and powerful memory that secures Asian American presence within Asian and American history.

Let's first consider the title of the piece: "Black Eyed Women." We begin to read with this image primed in our heads. It is a striking, disconcerting image that indicates an absence of life or sickness. However, the characterization within the first few pages subverts the work done by the title. The protagonist is a ghost-writer. She writes memoirs for those who have had a traumatic experience. Her profession ostensibly is helping those not able to express their own trauma. Thus initially the protagonist of this story seems to be engaging ethically with those who are "not counted in the historical and public record."[60] However, there is a underlying dispassion. Nguyen writes, "His publisher said that it was urgent that he finish his story while audiences still

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[58] Nguyen-Vo Thu-Huong, "Forking Paths: How Shall We Mourn the Dead," *Amerasia Journal*, 31:2, 2005, 159.
[59] Viet Thanh Nguyen, "Black Eyed Women," In *The Refugees*, 9, New York: Grove Atlantic, 2017.
[60] Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, 187.

remembered the tragedy, and this was my preoccupation on the day my dead brother returned to me."[61] The use of he/his pronouns creates an immediate distance between the narrator and the text, as it emphasizes that "she" has no ownership over the story in spite of her role as the actual writer of the memoir. This disconnect is reflected in the trauma victim's relationship to his story. He is so removed from his own memory that the value of his memoir is not defined by its worth to him as a trauma victim, but rather by its monetary capability. Removing the trauma victim's agency from his memoir is unethical. It violates his personhood – Thu-Huong writes "One does not become recognizably human until one acts in one's history."[62] The protagonist is complicit in the violation of the trauma victim's ability to act in his own history, thereby rendering him no longer human – a deeply unethical crime. This ethical failure is linked directly to the return of her brother by the narrative and by tone. The same dispassionate affect characterizes the dependent clause, her response to her brother's return. The syntax is brutal and flat – eleven out of the fourteen words in the clause are monosyllabic. And the placement of the adjective "dead" is disconcerting as well – the emphasis of the line is his being dead rather than his past existence.

For the narrator, death defines her brother's identity. The syntax of the following line has that same blank affect. "When she said my brother's name, I did not think of my brother. He had died long ago."[63] The redundant construction gives the first sentence a somber heaviness. Instead of writing, "I didn't think of him," Nguyen chooses to expand the sentence writing, "I did not think of my brother." The redundancy, especially the repetition of "my brother," forces the reader to consider the grim reality of the sentence – her brother's name means nothing to her. The next sentence is monotone, devoid of emotion. Four of the five words in the sentence are

[61] Viet Thanh Nguyen, "Black Eyed Woman," 2.
[62] Thu-Huong, "Forking Paths: How Shall We Mourn the Dead," 159.
[63] Nguyen, "Black Eyed Woman," 2.

monosyllabic, giving it a dull, robotic tone. The addition of the word "had" adds to the impersonality of the sentence; it removes the protagonist a step further from him. Even in her thoughts the protagonist is pulling away from the reality of his death. The protagonist's cold removal from her brother's death is immediately linked with silence. Pay attention to the punctuation of this sentence, as she responds to her mother: "I closed my eyes and said I did not know anyone by that name, but she persisted."[64] When her mother first wakes her, the protagonist speaks within quotation marks. Her mother says, "'Don't be afraid,'"[65] and the protagonist responds within quotations, "'Why would I be afraid.'"[66] After her brother, and his death, are present what is understood to be spoken is not punctuated as such. "I did not know anyone by that name" is left without quotation marks. Although she is speaking, within the text she is silent. The difference between these two situations is the presence of her brother's death. Once her brother's death is present within the text, she no longer speaks. Thus we have illustrated the connection between the protagonist's unethical ghost-writing, her failure to confront the trauma of her brother's death,[67] and her silence. We will now examine how Nguyen connects silence and sickness.

Nguyen subsequently links the protagonist's silence with two other motifs which permeate throughout the rest of the piece: physical and mental illness. Nguyen writes, "He [the brother] looked at my bare toes with their bare nails. Perhaps he sensed that I was not good with children. Motherhood was too intimate for me, as were relationships lasting more than one

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[64] *Ibid.*
[65] *Ibid.*
[66] *Ibid.*
[67] "Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that is very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on." Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, (Baltimore): The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996, 4.

night."[68] The repetition of the word "bare" emphasizes the physical vulnerability of the protagonist. The rest of the passage indicates her emotional sickness and guardedness. She enumerates the emotional risks she is unable to make, from feeling uncomfortable with children to not being able to sustain a relationship lasting more than one night. In this way her guardedness is reflected in the textual progression. Unwilling to disclose the effects of her trauma with the reader initially, she gradually reveals its accumulating effect. This emotional malaise is then linked to physical illness. "Perhaps he was not a figment of my imagination but a symptom of something wrong, like the cancer that killed my father."[69] It was silence that killed her father too: "The world was muzzled, the way it would be ever afterward with my mother and my father and myself, none of us uttering another sound on the matter."[70] Her father died of silence, and it seems that the protagonist's silence is beginning to catch up to her.

Nguyen explicates the relationship between the protagonist's illness and silence through a clever metaphor. He writes, "Panic surged from the bottomless well within myself that I had sealed with concrete."[71] The protagonist's consciousness is represented by the area beneath the well that has been sealed with concrete, and their cultural memory is above. The concrete symbolizes the unassimilated trauma. Nguyen understands the relationship between the traumatized individual and their cultural identity as such: unassimilated trauma blocks communication between cultural memory and the individual. Their cultural memory is dying of thirst – the thirst for stories, for history. The individual is trapped beneath the weight of their own trauma. It is the protagonist's mother who makes clear this silence, this agonal relationship between individual and culture: "'Now you know,' my mother said. 'Never turn your back on a

[68] Nguyen, "Black Eyed Woman," 9.
[69] *Ibid*.
[70] *Ibid,* 16.
[71] *Ibid*, 9.

ghost.'"[72] The ghost of the brother, symbolizing the unassimilated trauma, is not a symptom of the cancer, but rather the cause of the "cancer" that has rendered her incapable of maintaining relationships lasting more than one night. Nguyen's metaphor illustrated how this enforced silence affects the protagonist internally. By elucidating this metaphor we saw that this silence has an effect on the outside environment, which we understood to symbolize cultural memory. In the following section we will analyze the motif of silence paying particular attention to the protagonist's environment to understand the effect of silence upon it.

By examining the interplay between the descriptive imagery of the basement and the vocabulary of trauma we can understand how the disconnect between the protagonist and cultural memory is reflected in the environment.[73] Nguyen writes, "I descended into the bright basement, illuminated with fluorescent bulbs."[74] In colloquial English, basement, attic, and closet can all be used, in conjunction with a specific phrase, to denote the concealing of trauma. "I have skeletons in my closet, basement, attic." Each of these settings denote darkness, an absence of human traffic. The phrase is suggesting we keep our "skeletons" - our secrets, traumas, etc. - in darkness, out of sight. So, it would seem that the protagonist confronts these traumas by descending into the basement, yet it is "bright, illuminated by fluorescent tubes." What does this clash of expectation illuminate? The oxymoron of a bright basement clearly parallels the oxymoron of a ghostwriter who has not written about the ghosts which haunt her. By descending into the basement she enters the realm of her own "skeletons;" the traumatic memory of her

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[72] *Ibid.*

[73] "Moreover, examining the role of place as a significant formal innovation, especially the metaphoric and material value accorded to landscape imagery in the experience and remembrance of trauma, opens new avenues for a discussion of trauma's meaning for the individual and community and acknowledges larger cultural and political forces at work in the fictional creation of trauma." Michelle Balaev, "Trends in Literary Trauma Theory," *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature,* 41:2, 2008, 155.

[74] Nguyen, "Black Eyed Woman,"11.

brother's death. We see through analysis of her environment that the protagonist's writing is means for her to ignore true engagement with her own trauma. Although she is in the metaphorical location of her trauma, she does not truly engage it, she keeps the basement well lit. This mirrors her engagement with cultural memory. Although she produces trauma memoirs, she does engage ethically with the material. She removes the victim's agency from the texts, rendering them inauthentic. Thus just as she violates her clients, she violates cultural memory by contributing inauthentic material. Nguyen writes, "But to see oneself only as a victim simplifies power, providing an excuse from the obligations of ethical behavior in both political and other acts, including the act of representation in culture, and the more personal, intimate acts that take place in memory, family, and community.[75] By failing to confront her own trauma, the protagonist fails to see herself as more than a victim, and consequentially she fails to behave ethically in the act of representation in culture. Although she writes, she is silent. We will next examine how her failure to see herself as more than a victim affects her "more personal, intimate acts."

We now understand that the protagonist's ghostwriting as an unethical engagement with cultural memory and a means to avoid confronting her own trauma. We will now investigate the effects of this avoidance on a personal level. The insidious effect of her unassimilated trauma is illustrated by this exchange with her mother, in which the mother criticizes her for her silence in the face of death. She says,

> "When would you hold the wake? When would the celebration of my death anniversary be? What would you say?"
> "Write it down for me," I said. "What I'm supposed to say."
> "Your brother would have known what to do," she said. "That's what sons are for."

[75] Viet Thanh Nguyen, "Speak of the Dead, Speak of Viet Nam," 10.

To this I had no reply.[76]

She is incapable of grasping how to properly mourn her mother.[77] Note the progression of questions here, as it is peculiar. Instead of the gravity of each subsequent question increasing, the relative emotional weight of the questions decreases with each subsequent question. A wake is a direct encounter with death - it may involve physically seeing your dead family member's body for hours. And then the planning of the celebration of a death anniversary - not quite as stressful. And finally, what seems to be the least consequential of the tasks, speaking, gives our protagonist the most pause. The concrete barrier exists here too; she is incapable of interacting humanely with her mother, producing conflict in their relationship. She immediately replies after her mother mentions speaking, cutting off her mother's stream of questions - an uncharacteristically bold action for her. She makes a harsh demand. The separation of the two clauses by the "I said" serves to flatten the sentence out further, emphasizing its forceful, demanding tone. Her mother cruelly responds to the protagonist's request for guidance by invoking the trauma again. And it silences the protagonist fully, immediately. This illustrates a compounding cycle of conflict. The protagonist's inability to interact ethically with her mother leads to revisiting the trauma, which silences the protagonist, which was the initial problem. In the next section we will analyze how the she is able to break out of this cycle.

The presence of the ghost of her brother eventually forces her to confront her trauma. She enters her basement again, but the imagery is different. She says, "I descended into my basement once more and tried to write. There is a clear lack of light imagery here. No "fluorescent tubes."

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[76] Nguyen, "Black Eyed Woman," 9

[77] Derrida asserts memory is made "through this movement of mourning." Jacques Derrida, "Text Read at Althusser's Funeral," in Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, eds., *The Work of Mourning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 115.

There is imagery of darkness, as the protagonist admits that "Writing was entering a fog…"[78] As she admits to this darkness, she delves into her memories of trauma. She says,

> I was younger and weaker, yet it was my brother we buried, letting him slip into the ocean without a shroud or a word from me. The wailing of my mother and the sobbing of my father rose in my memory, but neither drowned out my own silence.[79]

Again here we see the way that speech, for our protagonist, carry weight greater than death. It is the ordering of what her brother must do without that suggests this - first the shroud, then finally, the word. It is not the absence of the symbol of death which troubles her, but the absence of her acknowledgement of it. Her parents do not actually speak, per say, but they vocalize - they are wailing, sobbing; actions that fulfill the role that speech plays. The disgust she has for her silence is clear. It illuminates the unsettling parallels between her disbelief that her silence was not "drowned" by the grief of her parents and her disbelief at her own survival: "Lurking on my shoulder as I stumbled through the grayness was the parrot of a question, asking me how I lived and he died."[80] This parallel suggests that she believes both that she should have died, and that her silence should have condemned her to death. This is the literary representation of her failure to assimilate her traumatic experience. She refuses to accept her role in the trauma: as a silent survivor. This refusal is the material by which the concrete barrier in the well was built. It forged a wall between the protagonist and the outside world. It is not the true question, but the parrot of question, the ghost of a question. And she cannot dispel the ghost of this question; it is not tangible, answerable. It exists on the other side of this well wall. She cannot hope to assimilate her trauma if she does cannot accept her place within it.

[78] *Ibid*, 12.
[79] *Ibid*, 13.
[80] *Ibid*, 12.

But if her inability to assimilate her trauma comes from her refusal to accept her place within it, what is the origin of this silence that disgusts the protagonist so? Readers have an inkling it is caused by trauma, but we do not truly know why trauma causes silence. What is the mechanism that undergirds this death? To answer this question, we must look to her description of the moment of trauma itself. Nguyen writes,

> When the little man threw me to the deck, the fall bruised the back of my head. When he ripped my shirt off, he drew blood with his sharp fingernails. When I turned my face away and saw my mother and father screaming, my ear drums seemed to have burst, for I could hear nothing. Even when I screamed I could not hear myself, even though I felt my mouth opening and closing. The world was muzzled, the way it would be ever afterward with my mother and father and myself, none of us uttering another sound on this matter. Their silence and my own would cut me again and again.[81] But what pained me the most was not any of these things, nor the weight of the men on me. It was the light shining into my dark eyes as I looked up to the sky and saw the smoldering tip of God's cigarette, poised in the heavens the moment before it was pressed into my skin.[82]

The first two sentences are identical in syntax. There is little more here than simple cause and effect. The narrative above all, makes logical sense. Getting thrown to the deck yields a bruise. The shirt being ripped off leads to blood. The feeling that there is some logic to this story, produced by these sentences, works to provide important contrast to what follows. The next sentence shatters any pretenses of logic. There is no cause, only the effect: "my ear drums seemed to have burst." There is no logical reason why this distortion of perception occurred. Taken as a "case study" of trauma, this scene aligns well with contemporary trauma theory. Kali Tal writes, "Traumatic experience catalyzes a transformation of meaning in the signs individuals use to represent their experiences. Words such as *blood*, *terror*, *agony*, and *madness* gain new meaning, within the context of trauma, and survivors emerge from the traumatic environment

[81] "the repetition at the heart of catastrophe – the experience Freud will call 'traumatic neurosis' – emerges as the unwitting reenactment of an event one can simply not leave behind." Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, 4.
[82] *Ibid*, 16.

with a new set of definitions."[83] Before the trauma, the protagonist and her external environment operated on compatible wavelengths. She was able to transmit and receive information from the world. After the trauma, her very perceptions are distorted. She cannot hear the world, and she cannot hear her own communication with the world. Her trauma has, as Nguyen writes, has "muzzled" her. But oddly this involuntary silence which is forced on her is not the source of her greatest pain - it is this peculiar description of the light of the sun.

This is a cryptic line. What is it about the sunlight that causes her so much pain? I believe the answer to this lies in the connotations of "light" and "God's cigarette." A cigarette pressed into the skin leaves a burn, a scar, a mark of the trauma. It marks the survivor as exactly that - a survivor. And "seeing the light" often is a colloquialism for gaining new understand - to become "enlightened" is to gain new knowledge. These two extrapolations suggest that her true pain comes from her knowledge that she is has been chosen by God, marked forever as a victim of trauma. This permanent distance is the pain: Elie Wiesel writes, "What can we do to share our visions? Our words can only invoke the incomprehensible. Hunger, thirst, fear, humiliation, waiting, death; for us these words hold different realities. This is the ultimate tragedy of the victims."[84] We see here that ultimately the pain is simply silence, disguised. It is the perceptual distortion of the world, applied to other humans. She has been changed by her trauma, she is no longer like others. She is alone in her trauma.

Nguyen has taken us into the depths of the protagonist's trauma. We have found the origin of her crippling silence. We will now examine the protagonist's eventual redemption in to

[83] Kali Tal, *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma,* New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 16.
[84] Elie Wiesel, "To Believe or Not to Believe," in *From the Kingdom of Memory,* New York: Summit, 1990, 33.

understand Nguyen's conception of an ethical engagement with one's personal trauma. A recollection of a different traumatic event proves to be the catalyst.

> We sat on the sofa of my basement office, warmer than the living room in November. "We would come outside after the bombing, you holding my hand while we stood blinking in the sun. What I loved was how after all the darkness of hiding there came the light. And after all that thunder, silence."[85]

Immediately there is a change in tone. The basement is no longer characterized as dark and grey, but "warmer than the living room." This change is reflected in the memory of trauma. The first sentence reflects the transition from darkness to light, as they come out of the bunker into the light. This excerpt defies the pattern traumatic distortion of perception and connection present in her recollection of her rape and her brother's death. She experiences trauma through the bombing, yet she is able to connect with the world as expected. Logic continued to exist despite the trauma: after darkness, light. After thunder, silence. She confronts this traumatic event, and finds it follows logic, finds that it is unmarred by the horror of death, rape, perceptual distortion and eventual isolation. This reassurance allows her to confront what has been preventing her from coming to terms with her trauma: the traumatic logic of the event. She says, "The parrot crouched on my shoulder, roosting there ever since we let my brother go to sea, and it came to me that letting it speak was the only way to get rid of it. 'Tell me something,' it said. 'Why did I live and you die?"[86] Nguyen creates an interesting parallel here. There is a smoothness present in these lines that places emphasis on the natural, logical progression of events. The murder of her brother is instead "let my brother my brother go to sea," and confronting her trauma is "letting it [the parrot] speak." The use of the word verb "let" is

[85] Nguyen, 16-17.
[86] *Ibid*, 17.

significant here. It is passive, implying that there is energy inherent within these movements. already potential energy lying behind these events. They will occur naturally, only the removal of a barrier is needed. This reflects the natural flow of events of the prior traumatic scene, in which darkness gives way to light, and thunderous sound to silence. Nguyen suggests through this parallel that much in the same way that a traumatic event naturally come to a close, so must memory of trauma. It must be allowed to run its course, from darkness to light, from thunderous sound to peaceful silence. Difficult, if not unanswerable, questions must be asked.

Thus, as soon as the protagonist allows the parrot to speak, the traumatic memory is resolved. Her brother says "'You died too," he said. "You just don't know it.'"[87] The protagonist's failure to assimilate her trauma stems from her refusal to accept her own place as a victim. She is isolated from the outside world by her self-loathing, self-loathing which springs from her inability to validate her own trauma in the face of her brother's death. This refusal leads to further mental dissonance, as she cannot understand her own "silence" out of the context of trauma. Without validation of her trauma, validation of the reality of her perceptual distortion and consequent isolation is impossible. Therefore, when her brother equates his literal death and her identity death,[88] which has distorted her perception and caused her isolation, her trauma is cathartically validated. This validation confirms her experience as traumatic, but it also functions as more deeply within the protagonist's consciousness as a validation of an essential aspect of the human psyche.

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[87] *Ibid,* 17.

[88] "A defining feature of the trauma novel is the transformation of the self ignited by an external, often terrifying experience, which illuminates the process of coming to terms with the dynamics of memory that inform the new perceptions of the self and world." Michelle Balaev, "Trends in Literary Trauma Theory," 149.

Her brother's validation acts as a confirmation of her humanity. This excerpt is a flashback to a conversation the protagonist had with one of her clients, Victor. The new perspective afforded by her brother's validation radically alters her perception of the scene. Nguyen writes,

> "Aren't you afraid of ghosts?" I asked.
>
> Over the line, in the silence, the static hissed.
>
> "You aren't afraid of the things you believe in," he [Victor] said.
>
> This, too, I wrote in his memoir, even though I had not understood what he meant.
>
> Now I did. My body clenched as I sobbed without shame and without fear. My brother watched me curiously as I wept for him and for me, for all the years we could've had together but didn't, for all the words never spoken between my mother, my father, and me. Most of all, I cried for those other girls who vanished and never came back, including myself.[89]

Here, in the flashback, we see the protagonist expressing her inability to assimilate her trauma. The diction of the excerpt illustrates how this refusal corrupts the natural logic of the environment, a motif which is present throughout the piece. The oxymoronic nature of the phrase "in the silence, the static hissed," illustrates the corruption, as the natural silence is violated by the hissing static. The verb "hissing" also reminds the reader of a snake, typically a symbol of unnaturalness or evil. This motif of unnaturalness continues in the line, "My body clenched as I sobbed without shame and without fear." The imagery of a body clenching and contorting elevates the motif of unnaturalness to prominence. It dominates the excerpt, causing the scene to reflect a reverse exorcism. The ghostly brother, the symbol of her unassimilated trauma, initially exists outside the body as a spectator; through this reverse exorcism she lets the trauma *in.* She allows herself to weep for the many things she has lost; she finally validates her own trauma. And by mourning "those other girls who vanished and never came back, including myself" she

[89] *Ibid,* 18.

acts ethically, makes memory[90] for those "not counted in the historical and public record."[91] Through this mourning she is finally able to escape the well of trauma and interact ethically with cultural memory. By way of this interaction she ceases to be alone in her trauma; no longer the only one who has seen "the smoldering tip of God's cigarette."[92] Thu-Huong writes, "One does not become recognizably human until one acts in one's history."[93] No longer a passive observer of her trauma, she acts, successfully redefining herself within the cultural memory of her trauma, thus achieving validation of her humanity through entrance into a common community.[94]

The successful redefining of her identity in the context of a community leads to her increased engagement with cultural memory. There are two excerpts which illustrate this effect. The first: "My agent called to offer me another memoir on even more lucrative terms […] I declined. I was writing a book of my own."[95] And, "'Ma,' I said. 'I haven't said all I wanted to say.'"[96] The assimilation of her trauma into her identity allows her to escape from the well of trauma and interact with cultural memory, providing it with her own authentic memories. The protagonist at last aligns with Nguyen's theoretical directives. He writes: "The writer and witness face the ethical demand to speak of things others would rather not speak of, or hear about, or pass into memory even if in doing so they may perpetuate the haunting rather than quell it."[97] As the protagonist falls into line with Nguyen's ethical position, her emotional and communicative malaise dissipates. The inclusion of the informal "Ma" changes the tone of the sentence, and consequently, our understanding of the protagonist. It gives her a human, natural feeling that has

[90] Derrida, "Text Read at Althusser's Funeral," 115.
[91] Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination,* 187.
[92] Nguyen, "Black-Eyed Women," *The Refugees,* 16.
[93] Nguyen-Vo Thu-Huong, "Forking Paths: How Shall We Mourn the Dead," 159.
[94] Tal, "Speaking the Language of Pain," 217-218.
[95] Nguyen, "Black-Eyed Women," 19.
[96] *Ibid.*
[97] Viet Thanh Nguyen, "Speak of the Dead, Speak of Vietnam," 9.

been conspicuously throughout the story. These two changes - the ability to communicate and the change in tone - suggest that through her cathartic validation and identity revision she has returned to health. She is able to connect with her mother as any child would, using an endearment that she does use anywhere else in the text. Interestingly, the protagonist's return to health is paired with a startling new attitude towards ghosts.

Up to this point in the text, the protagonist has interacted with the ghost of her brother fearfully, but also with affection and longing. After her cathartic validation, her attitude towards ghosts, or as we have understood them symbolically, unassimilated trauma, changes to one of outright aggression. Nguyen writes,

> More often, though, I go hunting for the ghosts, something I can do without ever leaving home. As they haunt our country, so do we haunt theirs. They are pallid creatures, more frightened of us than we are of them. This is why we see these shades so rarely, and why we must seek them out. The talismans on my desk, a tattered pair of shorts and a ragged t-shirt, clean and dry, neatly pressed, remind me that my mother was right. Stories are just things we fabricate, nothing more. We search for them in a world besides our own, then leave them here to be found, garments shed by ghosts.[98]

Her aggression is communicated through the verbs. She characterizes her writing as "hunting" for ghosts, a verb which carries clear connotations of violence. The aggressive tone is carried forward into the next sentence by its divisive syntax and diction. The parallel structure of the diction - the repetition of "haunt" in each clause – frames her writing as retaliatory, as vengeful. The phonic similarity of "haunting" and "hunting" also allows the reader to confuse the two. It pushes the reader to ask – what is the difference between haunting and hunting? This confusion infuses fear and the potential for violence into the relationship between humans and ghosts. The syntax of the sentence, the two clauses divided down the middle, emphasizes the division between humans and ghosts. The phrase in the next sentence, "pallid creatures," serves

[98] Nguyen, "Black-Eyed Women," in *The Refugees*, 21.

to dehumanizes ghosts. “Creatures” pointedly classifies ghosts as nonhuman and pallid, meaning “lacking depth or intensity of color”[99] works to characterize the ghosts as weak, especially in the context of the dependent clause, “more frightened of us than we are of them.” This startling rebranding of “ghosts” continues with the redefining of “ghosts” as “shades.” “Shade” is defined as “The visible but impalpable form of a dead person, a ghost. Also, a disembodied spirit, an inhabitant of Hades (= Latin umbra); chiefly with allusion to pagan mythology. Often collective plural, the shades: the world of disembodied spirits, Hades (cf. sense 2b).”[100] This definition is decidedly more ominous. It connects the spirit with Hades, the god of the underworld in Greek mythology, who is traditionally portrayed as an evil, malicious entity. “A talisman” is defined as “Anything that acts as a charm, or by which extraordinary results are achieved.”[101] Nevertheless, Nguyen’s choice to refer to her brother’s clothes as “talismans” is dehumanizes him and harks back to the “hunting” mentioned earlier, suggesting the clothes are a prize, a hunting trophy. The next phrase, “a tattered pair of shorts and a ragged t-shirt, clean and dry, neatly pressed” also includes subtle undertones of domination. The two descriptors, “tattered” and “ragged,” signify and emphasize the clothes’ otherworldliness. “Clean and dry, neatly pressed” signifies the protagonist’s imposition of the human world upon the ghost world - she has taken something alien and changed it, forced it to be something familiar. This is a dramatic change in the Nguyen’s rhetorical approach. Understanding the impetus behind this rhetorical shift is key to understanding the underlying motives of the entire piece.

We must now work to assimilate this rhetoric into our understanding of the piece. In this passage writing takes on the character of violent retaliation. We saw how the protagonist’s

[99] *Oxford English Dictionary, s.v.* “Pallid.”
[100] *Oxford English Dictionary, s.v.* “Shade.”
[101] *Oxford English Dictionary, s.v.* “Talisman.”

eventual acceptance of her own traumatized identity allows her to break free of its muzzling effect. But she still goes "hunting for the ghosts" despite her triumph over her own trauma. This passage is all about power. It is keen to emphasize the active role she takes in establishing her dominance over them, illustrated by the powerful "I" statement: "I go hunting for the ghosts." The dehumanizing language, the "hunting," her brother's clothes as a trophy – all of this indicates a dramatic shift in power. It is not subtle rhetoric. Nguyen means for the reader to understand that confronting and accepting trauma gives you power over it. This resonates obliquely with Nguyen's assertion that "Harm is a consequence of holding power, and raising the issue of how a minority can inflict harm is a tribute to the minority's existence in the world as an agent, and not merely a victim, a romanticized hero, or a passive subject in history."[102] In the context of Nguyen's essay, this quote is meant to emphasize the importance of thinking comprehensively about the consequences of the actions of minority groups. But taken within the framework of this final passage, it is a confirmation of Nguyen's celebration of the protagonist's newly found power. While Nguyen may warn against the consequences of holding power, he nevertheless desires the way it confirms "that minority's existence in the world as an agent." Thus this final passage acts as a powerful rhetorical reversal. The protagonist is initially characterized as silent, weak, afraid, and ethically corrupt. This passage paints her in the opposite light – dominant, ethically sure-footed, powerful, event violent– a conqueror of trauma.

Although the language of the last passage is assertive and tinged with violence, the underlying theoretical structure does not actually call for any sort of violence. The power that Nguyen desires is the power to make memory. He desires the power to "become recognizably

[102] Nguyen, "Speak of the Dead, Speak of Vietnam," 10.

human,[103]" the power to act "in one's history[104]" Thu-Huong argues that a significant part of the remembrance of the dead is making "their lives and deaths tangible."[105] This mirrors the final line in which the protagonist "leaves them [stories] here to be found, garments shed by ghosts."[106] Also take note of the dissociation which occurs here; after she created these stories and made the life of her brother tangible, he disappears. Thu-Huong writes, "We mourn by way of telling stories that would reconstruct our own identity in our cultural moment so that we can recuperate ourselves from the lost other."[107] The protagonist's trauma lived within her, unassimilated, as the ghost of her brother. She had failed to mourn her own trauma which, according to Thu-Huong, is a crucial mistake. She writes, "Vietnamese Americans as refugees occupy the position of self-mourners because no one else mourns us…Derrida thinks memory itself is itself formed 'through this movement of mourning.'"[108,109] Once she acknowledges her own trauma and mourns the death of her pre-trauma identity, she is able to form memory, which is symbolized by her brother's neatly folded clothes: trauma conquered. This formation of memory acts as the assimilation of trauma, as she is able to reconstruct her own identity separately from her trauma, thus finally recuperating herself from "the lost other," symbolized by the disappearance of her brother's ghost.

Understanding Nguyen's interweaving of powerful rhetoric and careful theoretical constructs illuminates the impetus of the work. I argue that this story, while fictional, is a carefully crafted manifesto for ethical, powerful engagement with cultural memory in the face of

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[103] Thu Huong, "Forking Paths: How Shall We Mourn the Dead," 158.
[104] *Ibid*.
[105] *Ibid*, 159.
[106] Nguyen, "Black Eyed Women," *The Refugees*, 21.
[107] Thu-Huong, "Forking Paths," 170.
[108] Jacques Derrida, "Text Read at Althusser's Funeral," in Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, eds., *The Work of Mourning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 115.
[109] Thu-Huong, "Forking Paths," 170.

collective trauma. Nguyen first illuminates the process of ethical recovery from traumatic experience, weaving his own theoretical constructs and political beliefs throughout. He also threads clever rhetoric throughout, initially portraying the protagonist as weak and ethically corrupt, before portraying her, after she confronts her trauma, as strong, confident, even violent. This strong reversal is meant to hold the reader's attention and impress upon them the impressive consequence of ethical recovery. But this story aims to educate as well; to show the reader how one recovers from a traumatic experience, how one engages with a traumatized community, how one engages with cultural memory. Above all, this story is meant to empower. Nguyen hopes to give his readers the political and ethical tools and the emotional desire to confront their own trauma and engage with cultural memory. Nguyen writes, "Asian Americans belong to America neither in memory nor in the present."[110] In "Black-Eyed Women" he gives his readers to the tools to both remember and forget.

[110] Nguyen, "Speak of the Dead, Speak of Vietnam," 13.

Chapter 4: Ocean Vuong's "Aubade with Burning City:" An Exercise in the Production of Countermemory

In the previous chapter I concluded that Nguyen's short story "Black-Eyed Women" functions as a manifesto which calls refugees to engage in the production of ethical countermemory to subvert dominant political narratives which subjugate the memories of minority groups. Here I turn to the poem "Aubade with Burning City" out of the collection *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* written by the Vietnamese American writer Ocean Vuong. I argue Vuong's poem functions to produce countermemory, memory which subverts the dominant political memory. [111] Sound continues to come to the fore as a central focus of my analyses of this production. Vuong's engagement with American music offers an angle through which I can begin analysis of his work. I will expand our previously narrow understanding of sound as representation and its importance to understanding narrative depictions of trauma to include how sound functions as music. I will begin the theoretical foregrounding of this analysis by seeking to understand the ways in which music can be used as a tool of cultural oppression.

It is first useful to redefine national myth and its relation to music. Kali Tal writes that national myth, "belongs to no individual, though individuals borrow from it and buy into to it in varying degrees," "is propagated in such places as textbooks, official histories, popular-culture documents, and public schools," and can be defined as "collective myths which comprise our concepts of what America and the American character are."[112] I argue that it is logical to include songs under the category "popular-culture documents," which establishes the connection between music and national myth.

[111] Nguyen, "Speak of the Dead, Speak of Vietnam,"13.
[112] Tal, "Speaking the Language of Pain," in *Fourteen Landing Zones*, 224.

In my analysis of O'Brien, I delved into the significance of sound, rather than music, as it pertains to psychological development and personal myth. I now must extrapolate this analysis and apply it more broadly to music in order to understand Vuong's rhetorical engagement with it. Stein defines music as a medium capable of "symbolically communicating aspects of mental life using sound formations in time."[113] I previously used Stein's theory that the processing of sound is important to psychological development and the production of memory to illustrate how traumatic sounds might shatter the personal myth. Music is a reproduction of an aspect of the personal myth, or using Stein's words, of an aspect of "mental life." So just as traumatic sounds may shatter personal myth, listening to music (which I understand to the symbolic embodiment, through sound formations in time, of another's myth) has the capacity to influence the listener's own. As discussed, national myth is not a monolith, but rather a mutable entity comprised of millions upon millions of cultural productions. It "can be gradually revised as new elements are introduced into the public discourse and old ideas become outmoded."[114] Thus certain pieces of music, depending on their level of integration into the current national myth, may wield immense power over how an individual conceives of "what America and the American character are."[115]

Up to this point I have been investigating national myth and its interaction with music without considering the role of America as an aggressor. In order to understand how American national myth and music may affect those of under the imperial/colonial control of the United States I must integrate some aspects of postcolonial theory. Theories of colonial discourse seek to understand the ways that representation and modes of perception are used as weapons of colonial power to keep colonized peoples under colonial rule. This primary method of this

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[113] Alexander Stein, "The Sound of Memory: Music and Acoustic Origins," *American Imago,* 64:1, 2007, 62.
[114] Tal, "Speaking the Language of Pain," 224.
[115] *Ibid.*

manipulation has been termed "the colonization of the mind."[116] This process functions by forcing the colonized to internalize the logic and language of the colonizer, which subsequently perpetuates the values and assumptions of the colonizers. If one understands the logic, language, values, and assumptions of a people to form their national myth, "colonization of the mind" can be conceived as a forced assimilation into the colonizer's national myth. The synthesis of the music's place within national myth with postcolonial theory illustrates how music can act as weapon of political oppression. The music of a country is representative of its national myth, and therefore contains the logic and language, values, and assumptions of this country. Thus music can be as a vehicle of the colonization of the mind by ingraining the values of the imperialist country into a colonized people, thereby displacing the memories, languages, values, and logic of the colonized people.

Understanding the context of "Aubade with Burning City" to applying the argument that music acts as a method of political erasure of memory to the poem. Vuong himself provides the context in an epigraph. He writes, "*South Vietnam, April 29, 1975: Armed Forces Radio played Irving Berlin's "White Christmas" as a code to begin Operation Frequent Wind, the ultimate evacuation of American civilians and Vietnamese refugees by helicopter during the fall of Saigon."*[117] The playing of "White Christmas" during the evacuation of Saigon represents the attempt of the American political establishment to manipulate and erase the Vietnamese memory of the fall of Saigon. "White Christmas," a symbol of the white, Christian America culture, is played over the evacuation, literally functioning to drown out the sound of death and destruction in the city with the sonic embodiment of the American national myth. It symbolizes the

[116] John McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism*, Manchester UP, 2010, 17.
[117] Ocean Vuong, "Aubade with Burning City," in *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 2016, 10.

American political establishment's attempt to minimize the violence and disruption caused by the Vietnam war through the suppression of minority memory.

Vuong seeks to subvert the United States political establishment attempts to erase the Vietnamese memory of the evacuation of Saigon, and more broadly, of the Vietnam war. Vuong uses the playing of "White Christmas" as a metaphor for the accompanying erasure and manipulation of memory surrounding the fall of Saigon. Using fragmentation of lyrics and syntax, the juxtaposition of contrasting imagery, and traumatic repetition, Vuong works to subvert the dominant American narrative of a smooth, painless physical and cultural takeover of Saigon, attempting to account for those "not counted in the historical and public record"[118] and thereby engaging in the production of countermemory.

Before I begin the direct analysis of the text, I must expand on the trauma theory I will use to analyze this text. While Nguyen and O'Brien's writing largely fit the abrective model of trauma, both Komunyakaa and Vuong's texts do not. Komunyakaa's text still concerned personal trauma, but his representation of African American identity rendered the abreactive model obsolete. Vuong, however, is focused on the broad cultural trauma; the erasure of Vietnamese memory surrounding the fall of Saigon by the American political establishment. As broad cultural trauma is often represented within descriptions of the environment, I will be analyzing Vuong's representations of trauma through "the role of place as a significant formal innovation, especially the metaphoric and material accorded to landscape imagery in the experience and remembrance of trauma, [which] opens new avenues for a discussion of trauma's meaning for

[118] Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, 187.

the individual and the community."[119] With both this broad theoretical direction and the more granular foci detailed above in mind, I will begin the direct analysis of the text.

The first line of the poem reads, "Milkflower petals in the street." Each individual word, "milk," "flower," and "petals," each recall their own peaceful images. Milk is pure, white, and associated with infants. Flowers recall similar motifs of peace and beauty, as do petals, a continuation of the flower image. In conjunction the words create the image of milkflower petals which are white, continuing the motif of innocence and purity. Vuong shatters this perception immediately with the subsequent line, which reads, "like pieces of a girl's dress." This phrase invokes a scene of violence through a simile. The reader is forced, by the line break which subverts the simple metaphor, to read it literally. As a result, these two lines function to subvert the reader's expectations.

Milkflower petals in the street

like pieces of a girl's dress.[120]

The fragmentation caused by the line break and the radical indentation creates more than a pause in the poem. It is a break, a division of sorts, and it's uncomfortable for the reader. This division makes rhetorical sense if we look at it in the context of the next line, "*May your days be merry and bright...*"[121] It is the first reference to "White Christmas" in the poem. It trails off into ellipses, a clear indication to the reader to take a moment to contemplate the first three lines. This juxtaposition creates a brutal contrast between innocent imagery and underlying violence. Vuong creates much of this contrast using the color white's accompanying associations of innocence.

[119] Michelle Balaev, "Trends in Literary Trauma Theory, 156.
[120] Vuong, "Aubade with Burning City," 10.
[121] *Ibid*.

The white motif and its subsequent violation are meant to reflect how the playing of "White Christmas" is an attempt to "whitewash" the violent memory of the evacuation of Saigon. Vuong also uses the violation of this motif to emphasize the underlying violence of the evacuation. Thus how Vuong aims to use juxtaposition and fragmentation to subvert the political erasure of Vietnamese memory is already apparent.

The next lines are subtly disturbing in their imagery. Vuong writes,

> He fills a teacup with champagne, brings it to her lips.
>
> *Open*, he says.
>
> She opens.[122]

Vuong's verb conjugation anchors the reader in the present, as he "fills" the teacup. This image is vaguely disturbing. These images don't quite match the readers expectations. Champagne is not mean to be in a teacup. This could potentially be looked past, were it not for the women's passive role in the scene. The passivity of the woman creates an uncomfortable power dynamic between the two. This dynamic is emphasized by the fragmentation of the line syntax which places her action's physically below the man's action on the page. Additionally, the italicization of the man's dialogue gives some indication to his identity. The only other italics in the poem are the lyrics of "White Christmas." This parallel suggests that the man is connected to the U.S., an assumption further confirmed by his later dialogue, which reads, "*my brothers have won the war and tomorrow*." Assuming this man is indeed associated with the U.S., I argue it is possible to view this interaction as a proxy of sorts, a representation of the interaction between American and Saigon. America is celebrating the evacuation, playing "White Christmas," attempting to

[122] *Ibid.*

drown out the destruction and violence. The man is force-feeding this woman champagne, traditionally a symbol of celebration, just as America is forcing celebration down the throat of Saigon itself. The woman and man will continue to symbolize Vietnam and America respectively as the poem continues. Apocalyptic imagery follows this profoundly disturbing comparison. Vuong writes,

Outside, a soldier spits out
his cigarette as footsteps fill the square like stones
fallen from the sky. *May*

There is the immediately apparent contrast between passivity of the women accepting the cup to her lips and the force with which the soldier spits his cigarette. Vuong weaves the images of raining fire, the falling fire of the cigarette, and brimstone, the falling stones, into the lines. Thus the traumatic aggression of the invader is translated into the destruction of the environment. The structure of the stanzas allow the images to create the sense of fear and helplessness. As the soldier spits his cigarette, there is a line break, and the reader falls with the cigarette towards the sounds of the footsteps. And there is a line break as the stones begin to fall from the sky, so that the reader falls with the stones. Thus again fragmentation plays an important role in emphasizing the violence inflicted upon Saigon by the invasion.

"*May*," lingering at the end of this last stanza, connects this past stanza with the next, which reads,

all your christmases be white

as the traffic guard unstraps his holster.[123]

The excising of "*may"* from the lyrics removes any premise of politeness from the lyric. While before the "may" added a layer of possibility, of hoping. The lyrics do not impose upon the listener, but rather hope that their Christmases be white. Without "may" the lyric becomes a stark, declarative statement. There is no question of the truth of the statement. All Christmases will be white. This statement becomes more sinister when it is coupled with the possibility of sexual violence suggested by the phallic imagery of the holster. This interpretation of this imagery is supported by the continued sexual imagery of the following line, which reads "His fingers running the hem/of her white dress."[124] If we take the consequences of sexual violence further, we could understand the lyric in this context to be suggesting that this woman may have to endure a reminder of this man for years to come - if she bears his child her Christmases will be changed forever. Again, the white motif is violated by its juxtaposition with violence. This violation is emphasized by the fragmentation of the line.

Vuong continues to elaborate on the motif of whiteness in the next stanza but does so in a way that complicates our understanding of the narrative structure of the poem. He writes,

His fingers running the hem

Of her white dress. A single candle.

Their shadows: two wicks.[125]

The tense of the first line seems to continue the events from the past few stanzas. Vuong again fragments his line structure to create an artificial pause between the two lines that calls attention

[123] *Ibid*.
[124] *Ibid.*
[125] *Ibid.*

to the fact that she is wearing a white dress -which in turns clearly recalls the first line of the poem, “Milkflower petals in the street/like pieces of a girl’s dress.” This complicates our understanding of the timeline of the poem. It causes us to question whether this scene is taking place in the narrative present or past. Is the first line meant to foreshadow this woman’s death? Death is certainly implicit within the lines; describing her dress as a candle suggests its purpose to expire, cease to exist. Through the image of fire the woman is conflated with the burning city. The next lines are difficult to parse. The wick of a candle being lit precipitates its melting, its demise. This causes to ask: how can their shadows be the cause of her death? Just as the beginning of this stanza caused us to question the temporal structure of the poem, these lines cause us to question the poem’s understanding of causality. Shadows are a physical representation of our own being, outside of our own perception of ourselves. Vuong suggests here that there is no true explanation for the violence done against this women, other than thee physical proximity of their existences. This emphasis on the cold randomness of these violent events is reinforced by the uncertainty surrounding the identity of the man. Up to this point in the poem we have had “He fills a teacup,” “Outside, a soldier,” “the traffic guard,” and “his fingers.” Other than the clear difference between the first two men, there is no clear separation between the rest of them. The perpetrator of this violence could conceivably be any of these men. This stanza does much to shake our understanding of the principles of causality and temporality that we believe the poem to run by. This resonates with the theme of erasure. As specific memories of the dead are erased through the political manipulation of memory, violence and death cease to have specificity. The death of no person matters; there are only nameless faces, killed at unknown times, in unknown places.

The confusion surrounding the narrative timeline of the poem is continued into the next stanza, which reads,

A military truck speeds through the intersection, children
shrieking inside. A bicycle hurled
through a store window. When the dust rises, a black dog
lies panting in the road. Its hind legs
crushed into the shine
of a white Christmas.[126]

Each of these lines details an unsettling or violent event - but notice that for each event the sonic descriptor is separated by a line break. This creates a theme of fragmentation which shapes the feel of the stanza. There are continuous thoughts or ideas within it. A continuous sentence places the mind at ease. It has a logical flow, a beginning, middle, and end, that cannot help but fit peacefully within the mind's expectations, no matter the horror of the content. Vuong works very cleverly to subvert this natural understanding of text. He breaks each line upon its critical juncture, in which the true character of each sentence is about to be revealed. Before one reads, "shrieking inside," one has an inkling but no real idea that the sentence will conclude with the violent kidnapping of children. The same is true for the bicycle, the black dog, and its legs. We are prevented from understanding the violence of these events coherently, cohesively, by Vuong's line breaks. In this way Vuong mirrors the true nature of trauma through his syntax. Balaev writes, "Traumatic experience becomes unrepresentable due to the inability of the brain, understood as the carrier of coherent cognitive schemata, to properly encode and process the

[126] *Ibid.*

event."[127] Trauma creates a mental discontinuity, a space in the brain that is empty, where the trauma should have been encoded. This discontinuity is symbolically represented by the way the line fragmentation prevents the reader from understanding contained within these lines coherently. When the reader moves to the next line, to finish the thought, he is shocked by the sudden return to violence. The reader has not been prepared for the violence by a sentence - quite the opposite. His mind has been wiped blank of expectation by the line break, and they are startled by the return to violence. The images get ever more visceral as the stanza progresses, building to a crescendo that culminates in with a decisive reference to "White Christmas." Why is this specific reference decisive? Pay close attention to the work Vuong does redefining how the reader's understanding of the connotations of "White Christmas." Outside of this poem, one would understand "the shine" of White Christmas to be the innocent, pure, joyful shine of freshly fallen snow. Vuong subjects this image to a vicious revision - instead conflating the shine of snow with the shine of the blood and gore of a mortally wounded animal's crushed limbs. It creates an deeply unsettling blend of blood and innocence, helplessness and purity, renewal and death. This is a crucial point in the poem - the culmination of Vuong's efforts to first create two contrasting worlds of memory, two contrasting storylines, told by single lines separated into two by clever line breaks. This stanza is the first climax of this effort, as Vuong combines the two versions of memory together violently. The placement of the final line of this stanza is exactly centrally aligned as no other line in the poem has been up to that point, indicating that these contrasting versions of memory clash horribly. Through this Vuong emphasizes the story of violence that the American political establishment has attempted to erase.

[127] Balaev, "Trends in Literary Trauma Theory," 150.

In the next stanza, we return to inside the house. There is a remarkable contrast between the violence of the previous stanza and the peace of this one. The lines read,

> On the bed stand, a sprig of magnolia expands like a secret heard
>
> for the first time.[128]

The immense contrast makes the seeming peacefulness of the line ominous. There is a significant sexual connotation. Images of the flower are often associated with female bodies. The phrase "a secret heard/for the first time" can also be read as sexually connotative is easily read sexually as well. The beauty of this line is deceptive. Everything that the reader has experienced in the poem up to this point has been tinged with violence. While violence may not inhabit this line explicitly, it haunts the reader as the speaker's memory. The last scene which took place indoors ("His fingers running the hem/Of her white dress"[129]) was also haunted by subtle undertones of violence. There seems to be a pattern forming here; the scenes alternate in their expression of violence as they alternate place. The scenes which occur outside contain explicit violence, while the indoor scenes are haunted by more subtle hints of it.

As expected the next stanza, staged outdoors, is full of images of violence. The stanza reads,

> *The treetops glisten and children listen,* the chief of police
>
> facedown in a pool of Coca-Cola.
>
> A palm-sized photo of his father soaking

[128] Vuong, "Aubade with Burning City," 10.
[129] *Ibid.*

beside his left ear.[130]

The auditory diction of the first line is relevant in the context of the last stanza, which detailed a secret being heard for the first time. I established that this secret was not likely to be as innocent as it was constructed to be -- more likely a secret of violence and humiliation. This stanza tells us that "*children listen*" to these secrets - we shall see that this stanza seems to reflect upon children's understanding of violence and trauma. Notably, there is direct rhyme in the first clause of the stanza - "glisten" and "listen" - which is broken with some force by the syntactical, rhythmic, and lyrical clunkiness of the following line. This is a deliberate rejection of the childlike rhyme of the song. Vuong mimics the perception of a child, and forces, for at least a second, the reader to accidentally adopt these perceptions, to great effect. There is the moment of confusion, as the reader wonders what he is doing in Coca-Cola, before the readers understands that is clearly a pool of blood which he is lying in. This motif is continued by the description of the photo as "palm-sized" - a childish description. The most poignant continuation of this motif, and perhaps the exclamation point upon this reflection, is the simple fact that the photo is of the police chief's father. It serves as a reminder that even adults placed in positions of dangerous power are nothing but children with fathers and mothers. Throughout this stanza Vuong continues his practice of placing line breaks at the crux of the violent actions of each line. In each stanza, Vuong is determinedly contrasting the sweet, innocent memory proposed by the lyrics of the song with the violent memories of death and chaos. In the next stanza Vuong turns directly to personification of the song itself.

The next stanza reads,

[130] *Ibid.*

The song moving through the city like a widow.

A white… A white… I'm dreaming of a curtain of snow

falling from her shoulders.[131]

This first line is one of the few left untouched by Vuong's line break proclivities. Why does Vuong make this choice? There seems to be some desire that this line makes an impression upon the reader - he leaves it untainted for that reason. This stanza is also unique in that the narrator takes ownership over the lyrics of "White Christmas," a technique used nowhere else in the poem. The speaker incorporates the lyrics into his own understanding of the events. As thus far the poem has done significant work to subvert and ironize the lyrics of the song rather than accept them into the narrative of the poem, this is a significant reversal. It is a peaceful, if mournful, image that Vuong creates. The song announces the death of the city, but softly, with a gentle image of the curtain of snow.

By this point the reader has been conditioned to violence occurring after a line break such as this. But the next line subverts this expectation, making the gentleness of the line even more poignant - a fact emphasized by the double space between the two lines. Vuong is very clever in the ways in he manipulates our expectations of the text. In this stanza he has broken several of the patterns that he had developed up to this point in the poem. The narrator has earnestly incorporated the lyrics into his own musings, and a line break is not followed by violence. But we will soon see that Vuong uses this reversal in expectation to his great rhetorical advantage in the next stanza.

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[131] *Ibid.*

The next stanza returns to violence. It reads,

Snow scraping against the window. Snow shredded
with gunfire. Red sky.
Snow on the tanks rolling over the city walls.
A helicopter lifting the living just
out of reach.[132]

The incorporated lyric of "White Christmas" in the previous stanza in fact details that the narrator is *dreaming*. The gentleness of the falling curtain of snow was in fact a dream and this stanza is the return to reality. Vuong's word choice in the first line is significant in that it directly contradicts the gentle diction of the previous stanza. The snow does not fall gently, but rather scrapes against the window. And the following line break, in a return to the poem's typical structure, separates the subject of the line from violence done against it. The red sky provides an obvious symbolic contrast to the white curtain of snow - the illusion of peace against the reality of violence. The stark brevity of the line emphasizes the gravity of the contrast. The next line, with its images of tanks, links the "curtain of white" more intimately with violence. In the final line of the stanza Vuong utilizes indentation to infuse the syntax with feeling. There is a large pause created by the distance between the two parts of the last line. It is a pause filled with an echoing silence, echoing with finality. The diction of the line is significant as well - Vuong chooses to term those being evacuated "the living." There is not much specificity to this designation, and this seems to be a purposeful oversight. The living is whomever the helicopters,

[132] *Ibid.*

the Americans, designate to be worth living. Thus as the living are evacuated the city and those who remain are marked as "dead." This idea elaborated on in the next stanza.

The next line may be the most important in the piece. It is marked by its structural isolation, separated by a space in both directions. The stanza that surrounds it reads,

> The city so white it is ready for ink.
>
> The radio saying run run run.
>
> Milkflower petals on a black dog
>
> like pieces of a girl's dress.[133]

Here Vuong recontextualizes the motif of white that he had constructed earlier in the poem. Previously "white" served as a symbol of innocence and of purity; here, it takes on a more sinister character. The inclusion of the "so" in front of white signifies it is white in excess. What is the consequence of this excess? The city is ready for "ink," for rewriting. This has an extremely significant double meaning that defines this poem to its core. The playing of the American cultural symbol "White Christmas" to signify the death of Saigon symbolizes the writing of physical America and United States national memory over the city. The city has been bleached - at least that is what the American narrative would like you to be believe.

The next line is an ominous departure from the established structure of the poem. Previously the radio has spoken exclusively through italicized lyrics, without introduction. This time, however, there are no italics. In fact, there is no punctuation at all. This line is stripped of all pretenses, stripped of any disguises. If we look at the line from this angle, we can understand it as the true, ominous message of the "White Christmas." Underneath the pat lyrics is a simple

[133] *Ibid.*

message: there will be no memory of Vietnam outside the American memory of Vietnam. But Vuong offers the possibility of redemption. If the city has been bleached, it is fresh for ink. Perhaps the Vietnamese might right their own narrative, their own countermemory. In the very next line he pushes against the image of a bleached Saigon. He ends the stanza with a beautiful image of the black dog resting with the milkflower petals upon it. He does not necessarily dispute the presence of death, he actually invokes it. But he does so with specificity, with reverence, with respect. Where do we go from here, from this seeming proclamation of artistic purpose? Vuong brings us directly back to "White Christmas."

Any sense of revelation or change engendered by the introspection of the previous stanza is negated by the immediate return to the lyrics of "White Christmas." This is the second time this lyric has been quoted in the piece, but the punctuation surrounding it is markedly different. The stanza reads,

> *May your days be merry and bright.* She is saying
> something neither of them can hear. The hotel rocks
> beneath them. The bed a field of ice.[134]

The first time the lyric is quoted in the poem it ends with ellipses that leave room for interpretation. The period at the end of this reiteration lends a feeling of sinister finality. This is compounded by the confusion created by the indentation of the next line. We understand intuitively that the women is not actually saying the lyrics, but nevertheless it shakes the reader's perception. This brief rattling of the reader's perception leads to increased focus on the second line of the stanza. We must ask, what does it mean that she says something that neither of them

[134] *Ibid.*

can hear? It means there is an utter failure in communication. She cannot hear herself, and thus cannot know what she herself is saying. We can understand this failure in communication as the metaphorical product of the playing of "White Christmas." Vuong ensures that we, the reader, hear "White Christmas" as she tries to speak - we are thus included into the relationship we see on the page, as "White Christmas" prevents communication between the man and woman. We see this failure of communication represented as physical destruction and physical pain. This constitutes a clear metaphor for the war - failure to communicate resulting in destruction and death. In the next stanza Vuong again turns to form to give greater nuance to our understanding of the man's relationship to "White Christmas."

The next stanza begins with italics, but again changes our understanding of what those italics have come to signify. The stanza reads,

> *Don't worry*, he says, as the first shell flashes
>
> their faces, *my brothers have won the war*
>
> *and tomorrow…*
>
> The lights go out.[135]

We see the man speak for the first time here. That his speech is in italics immediately indicates to us his connection to the "White Christmas." He is effectively "speaking the language" of the song - in other words, he is engaging with the writing of physical America, American culture, and American narrative over the city. He exists within the American national narrative of the war. His continuing dialogue allows us to understand what operating in this narrative means to Vuong. Notice the contrast between the chronological indicators within the

[135] *Ibid.*

stanza. “The first shell flashes” indicates beginnings through its diction - obviously, as it is the first shell, but also through the imagery of “flashes.” The word “flash” tends to indicate a catalyst, or a beginning. This works to contrast with the man’s proclamation that the war is over. Thus we can understand the playing of “White Christmas” as a metaphor for the American suffocation and repression of the continued effects of the war after it’s official “end.” This is emphasized by the shutting off of the light. However, the pairing of structure (ellipses) and symbol (tomorrow) indicates that their relationship might be continued, so the stanza leaves us without any closure. And the next stanza fails to provide any explicit closure. It is a short one, reading just two lines. Vuong writes,

I’m dreaming. I’m dreaming…

to hear sleigh bells in the snow…[136]

There is an engineered confusion here, as the italics seem to continue the man’s dialogue from the previous stanza. The similarity in substance between the two stanzas adds to this confusion as well - the lights go out, and we are suddenly reading about dreaming. It takes the reader a few moments to understand that this not a continuation of the dialogue, but rather a return to the lyrics of “White Christmas.” This shock both mirrors and emphasizes the presence of American memory in Saigon after “the lights go out,” after the war is ostensibly over. This lingering is reinforced by the ellipses concluding, or failing to conclude, each line. The erasure of Vietnamese memory by the American national memory has effects that last long past the physical withdrawal of armies. Note the presence of the auditory imagery in the second line, it significant in the context of the following stanza.

[136] *Ibid.*

The final stanza brings the motifs of sound and time to their respective climaxes. It reads,

In the square below: a nun, on fire,

runs silently toward her god --

Open, he says.

She opens.[137]

The first line grounds us back into the place of the poem firmly. The colon leaves us no room for interpretation - we are looking in the square. There is a structural change here, separating this particular description of violence from the majority within the poem. There is not a line break to emphasize the shock of the violence. The narrator seems tired, exhausted by the violence - too weary to emphasize the tragedy of this violence. The next line brings us back to the reference to sound in the previous stanza. As the sound of sleigh bells occupies the space within dreams, the space left behind after the war, the nun, in the midst of her anguish, is left with no means to express herself. She has been robbed of her expressive ability by "White Christmas." The only way that the nun is able to make herself "heard" is through her death. This creates a feeling of trappedness that helps to contextualize the final two lines of the poem. The dash after "god" indicates that there is a connection between the lines. The question the final two lines poses is obvious - why does she open? The nun's plight is clearly the answer. There is no space for her to be heard, to resist. The sound of sleigh bells occupies the space of potential agency and negates her capacity for resistance -- The spaces between the final two lines indicate the inevitability of her surrender and the city's in the face of the overwhelming noise of the "White Christmas," or

[137] *Ibid.*

in other words, the overwhelming noise of the American national memory as it is written over a falling Saigon.

In this poem Vuong works to subvert the dominant political narrative which works to erase the suffering of the people of Saigon during the fall of their city. He pushes against the narrative produced and symbolized by the playing of "White Christmas" over the invasion of the city and emphasizes the reality and presence of violence. He achieves this subversion through use of juxtaposition of contrasting narratives and syntactical fragmentation that mirrors the cognitive discontinuity engendered by traumatic experience. In this way Vuong's work resonates with Nguyen's. He seeks to mourn a lost population, thus producing countermemory. Nguyen writes, "Asian Americans belong to America neither in memory nor in the present."[138] Vuong engages with Vietnamese memory and works to establish its validity within the American cultural past through his ethical engagement with the forgotten trauma. Though the simple fact of his own creative production of poetry Vuong grounds Asian Americans further into the present American consciousness working, as Komunakaa did, to stake "his claim for unqualified status in the human race."[139]

[138] Nguyen, "Speak of the Dead, Speak of Vietnam," 13.
[139] Aubert, "Yusef Komunyakaa: The Unified Vision – Canonization and Humanity," 119.

Conclusion:

The popularity of O'Brien as essential war literature which "has lived in the bellies of American readers for more than two decades"[140] emphasizes the privileging of narratives and people like O'Brien in the category of Vietnam war literature. The work of African American veterans like Komunyakaa and Vietnamese American immigrants like Nguyen and Vuong implicitly critiques this narrow account. Analysis of these works using inclusive trauma theory, not bound to a singular understanding of the posttraumatic psyche, yields the understanding that these four works, despite their topical similarity, have no common historical referent. Each of these books is about the historical event "The Vietnam War," but the wars they depict are vastly different, yielding different narrative objectives. It is telling that only O'Brien's work was characterized by the inward quest for salvation from the effects of trauma. By contrast, the works of Komunyakaa, Nguyen, and Vuong turn outwards, working to expose the artificiality of racial difference or to produce ethical countermemory. Their works are working to fight the erasure of minority memory of the war that continues to occur every moment that narratives like O'Brien's are privileged within Vietnam war literature, which calls for the reconceptualizing of the entire canon. It must no longer privilege white American veterans and must include literature concerning the indirect consequences of war, such as immigration. Perhaps then, when Komunyakaa, Nguyen, and Vuong no longer must fight against the continual erasure of their cultural memory of the war, they will turn inwards to engage in personal rather than cultural healing.

[140] Scott, A.O., "Voicing Vietnam," nytimes.com, https://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/24/books/review/tim-obriens-things-they-carried-read-by-bryan-cranston.html (Accessed March 11, 2019)

There are several aspects of this thesis that in future work I would strive to qualify. I spoke above of an "inclusive" trauma theory that does not subscribe wholly to the abreactive model. Yet this supposedly inclusive theory that I choose to use in my work privileges specific understandings of what "healing" must consist of. Does healing necessary demand the breaking of silence? Or are there literatures of Vietnam war literature in which the choice not to speak is an act of resistance?

This thesis also does not attend to the place of gender within these texts. There is gender-based power violence often explicit, and always implicit, in each of these texts. To ignore gender's influence on these works denies a comprehensive understanding of the representations of trauma within these works, thus obscuring the goals of the thesis. Analyzing these instances of gendered violence could have yielded insight into the impact of trauma upon gender relations.

By attending more carefully to these two aspects of the piece I would seek to both expand and narrow my argumentation. I would expand my understanding of what silence itself signifies, thus opening up my theoretical framework and allowing for a more inclusive analysis of the texts. I would also seek to investigate gender more thoroughly in order to more fully explore the different ways trauma interacts with cultural gender differences.

These expansions would allow this work to produce more comprehensive understandings of the interactions between trauma, culture, memory, and gender within Vietnam War literatures.

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