

## MAGICAL REALISM IN TIM O'BRIEN'S VIETNAM WAR FICTION

**James Schramer**

*Youngstown State University*

### ABSTRACT

Although Tim O'Brien has denied the literary influence of Gabriel García Márquez and Jorge Luis Borges and their versions of "magical realism" on his work, he has produced a body of work about the American experience in Vietnam that corresponds closely to what Alejo Carpentier referred to in his preface to his first novel, *El reino de este mundo* (*The Kingdom of This World*, 1949), as *lo real maravilloso americano*. This essay argues that O'Brien's "magical realism" is not the result of a traceable literary heritage; it is, rather, the product of social and political conditions in the United States that began with American political and military hegemony after World War II and continued up to and beyond its defeat in Vietnam. Living with the memory of a war he did not want to fight is difficult enough for O'Brien. It is even more difficult for him to live in a country whose leaders continue to deny American culpability in that war. For O'Brien, the magical and marvelous are more than stylistic tricks; they are his means of not only escaping but also of exposing the reality of a war conducted by those who proclaimed they had to destroy in order to save, who insisted on the "plausibility of denial."

Beginning with the autobiographical *If I Die in a Combat Zone* (1973) and continuing with *Going After Cacciato* (1975), *The Things They Carried* (1990), and *In the Lake of the Woods* (1994), Tim O'Brien has produced a critically acclaimed body of work on America's war in and against Vietnam.<sup>1</sup> In trying to come to terms with his personal and America's collective experience in Vietnam, O'Brien has created works that transcend the facts upon which they are based and enter a world in which the

magical becomes possible. In a 1978 review of *Going After Cacciato* for the *New York Review of Books*, Richard Freedman writes that “Clearly we are dealing here with what the new South American novelists would call ‘magical realism’.”<sup>2</sup> Since the appearance of Freedman’s review, however, O’Brien has resolutely denied the stylistic or thematic influence of Latin American writers on his work.

When Eric James Schroeder observes in his interview with O’Brien that the author’s “process of imagining seems to be similar to what happens in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*,” O’Brien replies that he has never read Gabriel García Márquez.<sup>3</sup> Asking Schroeder if this is another question about the “magical realism thing,” O’Brien admits that after writing *Going After Cacciato* he has since read and come to admire Jorge Luis Borges. “I’d feel good if that magical realism thing were directed toward Borges. But García Márquez—I’m afraid I still haven’t finished anything he’s written” (139). O’Brien’s denial of Márquez’s literary influence could be interpreted as a denial of the literary “father,” a process that Harold Bloom describes in *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973). However, even if we acknowledge the veracity of O’Brien’s claim that he was not influenced by Borges or Márquez, it is still possible to consider his work as a North American version of magical realism.

If we put aside questions of literary influence, and look instead at the social and political conditions in the United States during and after the war in Vietnam, we can see that many of the same stresses that led South American writers to use the marvelous as a way of getting at the real were also present in North America. O’Brien’s denial of stylistic or thematic influence does not invalidate his having come to a sense of the magical and marvelous as a way of understanding the complex and dark reality that was the war in Vietnam. As he explains to Schroeder, “We live in our heads a lot, but especially in times of stress and great peril. It’s a means of escape in part, but it’s also a means of dealing with the real world—not just escaping it, but dealing with it” (138). O’Brien goes on to point out that one of the themes of *Cacciato* is “how one’s memory and one’s imagination interpenetrate, interlock” (138). As the lines from Siegfried Sassoon with which O’Brien begins *Going After Cacciato* remind us, “Soldiers are dreamers.”

It is as a soldier, and a dreamer that O’Brien displays his affinities with the magical realism of Gabriel García Márquez, Jorge Luis Borges, Isabel Allende, and Ariel Dorfman.<sup>4</sup> Although he denies the direct influence of magical realism on his work, O’Brien is acutely aware that in fiction lies the deepest truth. As he tells Schroeder, a writer has to “tell lies to get at the truth” (141). In *The Things They Carried* (1990), O’Brien reminds us that “Stories are for joining the past to the future. Stories are for those late hours in the night when you can’t remember how you got from where you were to where you are. Stories are for eternity, when memory is erased, when there is nothing to remember except the story” (40).

In the South American tradition of magical realism, authors argue that the magical is often more real and more believable than reality. As Alejo Carpentier writes in his preface to his first novel, *El reino de este mundo* (*The Kingdom of This World*, 1949), “America is far from using up its wealth of mythologies. After all, what is the entire history of America if not a chronicle of the marvelous real.”<sup>5</sup> Distinctions between the real and the marvelous have been especially hard to draw in countries such as Argentina or Chile, where those who disagreed with the government would vanish

in the night. In Argentina, where they are referred to as "*los desaparecidos*" (*the disappeared*), they give silent testimony to the validity of theories that locate the real presence of things (or people) in their absence.

Although Carpentier restricts his observations about the marvelous real in America to the literature of Latin and South America, they are equally applicable to the literature of North America. As Lois Parkinson Zamora demonstrates in "Magical Romance/Magical Realism: Ghosts in U.S. and Latin American Fiction," North American writers such as Flannery O'Connor and Nathaniel Hawthorne can be instructively read through the eyes of Márquez and Borges.<sup>6</sup> Zamora argues that "Whatever the specific political purposes and cultural contexts of romance and magical realism, their characters move toward mythological levels, universal communities, in order to dramatize individual realizations of archetypal human patterns" (499). Among the cultural and political contexts behind Hawthorne's choosing romance over realism was the uncomfortable presence of the Puritan past, with its legacy of intolerance. To understand and critique the forces of history, Hawthorne found it necessary to stand outside of them.

Although twentieth-century Americans like to see themselves as more rational than their nineteenth-century ancestors and more politically stable than their Latin and South American neighbors, late twentieth-century America has its own uncomfortable truths, among them the American war in and against Vietnam. While many Americans could comfortably ignore the war in Vietnam, except when it intruded on their television screens, those who fought in that war were forced to come to terms with its uncomfortable reality. Army draftees, like O'Brien, were reluctant warriors. Some career soldiers might dream of battlefield glory; the draftee's dream was to escape combat.

In his early memoir *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, O'Brien experiments with alternative realities. Sent to Advanced Infantry Training (AIT) after he completes Army basic training, O'Brien, like many draftees, tries to deny the reality of his going to Vietnam. The reality, however, will not go away. "The man who finds himself in AIT is doomed, and he knows it and thinks about it. There are no more hopes about being a rear-echelon trooper" (49). The soldier in AIT can forget about the comfortable life of an Army clerk in Germany. The drill sergeant tells the trainees to give up such hopes. "I don't want you to mope around thinkin' about Germany or London... Don't even think about it, 'cause there just ain't no way" (49).

In AIT, in addition to learning "new ways to kill people" (48), O'Brien dreams of ways to escape the war. He dreams about taking a bus from Seattle north to Vancouver, Canada, from there it would be easy to fly to Europe and freedom. Soldiers are dreamers, but O'Brien finds he cannot live out his fantasy. He goes to Seattle but no further. He discovers that he lacks the courage to flee the war. So, he returns to Fort Lewis, to the army, to the certainty of going to Vietnam. He finds that he can neither disappear nor make the war disappear.

Disappearance is an even more pronounced theme in *Going After Cacciato* and other of O'Brien's stories and novels. Vietnam was a place where people could and did disappear. They could step on a landmine and all but vaporize; they could be taken away in the night by the Viet Cong or by South Vietnamese security and their CIA allies. Not only people but also places could be made to disappear. The military

rhetoric of Vietnam has become infamous for giving us such twisted logic as “we had to destroy the village to save it.” In such an environment, facts are suspect; it is only stories that survive. The plot of *Going After Cacciato* hinges on the possibility of a character doing something implausible —walking away from the war, indeed, walking all the way from Vietnam to Paris, where the peace talks are being held.

When Cacciato (the name means hunter in Italian) decides to go AWOL (absent without leave) and walk to Paris, he is followed (hunted) by his platoon. They follow him into the mountains for five days before they lose sight of him, and the lieutenant reports Cacciato as Missing in Action (MIA). This is where the “facts” of the story stop. But the imagined possibilities of the story continue. Cacciato, first as an AWOL soldier and then as an MIA, becomes more truly present in his absence than he was in his presence. Standing guard at night at the unit outpost, Paul Berlin wonders “What happened, and what might have happened” (27).

As Paul Berlin daydreams about the entire platoon following Cacciato all the way to Paris, he remembers the platoon and what it has endured. In his imagination, men who are dead at the start of the story —Billy Boy Watkins, Frenchie Tucker, Bernie Lynn, Sidney Martin, Jim Pederson, Rudy Chassler, and Ready Mix— come back to life and then die again in the world of memory. Trying to understand how Cacciato could believe that he could walk away from the war, Berlin remembers Cacciato fishing on the edge of a water-filled bomb crater in a landscape that the platoon refers to as the “World’s Greatest Lake Country.” There are no fish —unless one counts the bodies that had “bobbed to the surface” and were hauled away in cargo nets attached to helicopters (159) —but Cacciato keeps fishing, as if he can will fish to appear.

“The World’s Greatest Lake Country” is a story that serves very well to connect the real and the magical, the factual and the mythic. The metaphoric fish in this story are the burned and mangled bodies that are hauled from the bomb craters. By imagining that the craters are really lakes filled with literal, not figurative, fish, Cacciato rejects the reality of the war he is about to leave. The story also provides an ironic twist to a North American myth, with which O’Brien, as a native Minnesotan, is very familiar. Minnesota’s ten thousand lakes were supposed to have been formed by water filling the hoof prints of Babe, the giant blue ox, which accompanied Paul Bunyan, the mythic woodsman. Many of the crater lakes in O’Brien’s story were formed by the heavy bombs dropped from B-52 bombers, which the soldiers called “Bufs,” a term that reminds us of the word buffalo.<sup>7</sup>

In her essay, “American Exceptionalism and Empire in Tim O’Brien’s *Going After Cacciato* (1995),” Katherine Kinney argues that this novel “presents what Fredric Jameson calls a ‘magical narrative,’ a romance in which the formal contradictions of narrative present tensions repressed in social and political life —in this case the contradiction between American exceptionalism and empire” (634).<sup>8</sup> By extension, Kinney’s argument can be applied to embrace all of O’Brien’s writings about the Vietnam War. In all of his writings about his and America’s experience in Vietnam, O’Brien is deconstructing the myth of American innocence. As O’Brien observes in an essay he wrote in 1994 for the *New York Times Magazine*, “Evil has no place it seems in our national mythology. We erase it. We use ellipses. We salute ourselves and take pride in America the White Knight, America the Lone Ranger... (52)<sup>9</sup> In his superb collection of interrelated tales, *The Things They Carried* (1990), O’Brien con-

tinues to turn myth against itself. In "How To Tell a True War Story," O'Brien detaches the contemporary war story from its Homeric and epic predecessors. He argues that a "true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior, nor restrain men from doing the things men have always done" (*Things*, 76). In the "true war story" fact and fiction, vision and distortion become part of the story's reality.

What seemed to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way. The angles of vision are skewed... The pictures get jumbled; you tend to miss a lot. And then afterward, when you go tell about it, there is always that surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it *seemed*. (78)

Few stories in *The Things They Carried* better illustrate the "surreal seemingness" of the war in Vietnam than the "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong." "Vietnam," the narrator tells us, "was full of strange stories, some improbable, some well beyond that, but the stories that will last forever are those that swirl back and forth across the border between trivia and bedlam, the mad and the mundane" (101). This story is told by "Rat" Kiley, who had "a reputation for exaggeration and overstatement, a compulsion to rev up the facts" (101). In terms that come as close to his definition of magical realism as we are likely to find, O'Brien explains that

For Rat Kiley, I think, facts were formed by sensation, not the other way around, and when you listened to one of his stories, you'd find yourself performing rapid calculations in your head, subtracting superlatives, figuring the square root of an absolute and then multiplying by maybe. (101)

Kiley's story is about a young medic, Mark Fossie, who manages to bring his high school sweetheart come from Cleveland Heights, Ohio, to a remote army outpost in the highlands of Vietnam. Blonde, blue eyed, and seventeen, Mary Ann Bell arrives at the camp wearing white culottes and a pink sweater. Mary Ann is young but she is not timid. Curious about Vietnam and its people, she quickly learns to pick out phrases in Vietnamese. Equally quick to pick up "skills" from the medics, she learns "how to clip up an artery and pump up a plastic splint and shoot in morphine" (109). One of the men teaches her to disassemble and fire an M-16. Soon, she adopts the "the habits of the bush" (109). She stops wearing jewelry, cuts her hair short and wraps it in a green bandana (109). She had come out to Vietnam because she loved Fossie; she stays because she begins to love the jungle, and the war. "Everything I want," she tells Fossie, "is right here" (109).

Eventually, Mary Ann wanders over to a separate part of the camp where a squad of Green Berets is billeted. One night she disappears. A frantic and jealous Fossie thinks she has slipped into one of the hootches with another of the medics. In the morning he learns that she has been out with the Green Berets on an all-night ambush. Fossie temporarily gets her to return to dressing and acting as she did when she first arrived but Mary Ann has changed. Kiley recalls that "The wilderness seemed to draw her in... It was as if she had come to the edge of something, as if she were caught

in that no-man's land between Cleveland Heights and deep jungle" (115). The pull of the jungle proves stronger than that of the world from which she has come. She slips back to the Green Berets and resumes going out on patrols. When she returns after a three-week absence, she has been transformed. Her eyes "shine in the dark—not blue, though, but a bright glowing jungle green" (116).

Learning that she has returned, Fossie decides to confront her in the Green Berets' hootch. He is stunned by what he finds. The hootch reeks with the smell of incense, dead animals, and human flesh. Mary Ann steps from the shadows. Barefoot, wearing a pink sweater, white blouse, and a simple skirt, she momentarily "seemed to be the same pretty girl who had arrived a few weeks earlier" (120). Then, Fossie notices her jewelry. "At the girl's throat was a necklace of human tongues" (120). "You're in a place," she quietly tells him, "where you don't belong" (120). Fossie begs Kiley to "Do something... I can't just let her go like that" (121). Kiley says, "Man, you must be deaf. She's already gone" (121). Wearing a necklace of human tongues, "the tips curled upward as if caught in a final shrill syllable" (120), Mary Ann has claimed the male narrative of war as her own. She, in turn, has been claimed by the land, by the war, by the narrative she has desired to master.

Mary Ann becomes addicted to war. "Vietnam made her glow in the dark. She wanted more, she wanted to penetrate deeper into the mystery of herself, and after a time the wanting became needing, which turned to craving" (124). She continues to go out on patrols, but she stops carrying a rifle. She takes "crazy, death-wish chances" (124). Then, one day she disappears. Kiley says that he heard that she "walked off into the mountains and did not come back" (124). But there are those who will swear that she is still out there in the night, in the jungle. "She had crossed to the other side. She was part of the land... She was dangerous. She was ready for the kill" (125).

"Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" reverses the common mythology of the American war story. Instead of staying home, waiting for her soldier to return, Mary Ann Bell travels to Vietnam. Once there, she tries out different roles. At first, she is the company sweetheart—symbolic of all the girlfriends, real or imagined, about which the young soldiers dream. Then, she takes on the stereotypical role of female caregiver, working alongside the medics as a nurse. But the male medics have already filled the caregiver role, and it is too tame for her taste. Looking for more action, she appropriates to herself the male role of stalker and killer, lying out at night with the Green Berets on ambush. Finally, even the Green Berets prove too tame, and Mary Ann wanders off into the mountains and becomes part of the jungle.

The "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" rewrites the male narrative of the girlfriend left back home. In "On the Rainy River," another of the stories in *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien rewrites the male coming-of-age story. The stereotypical male coming-of-age story features a youth who sets out on journey in which he makes mistakes, faces dangers, and discovers within himself a reservoir of courage. In this mostly autobiographical tale, O'Brien strips away the myth of the youthful hero to expose the false courage that lies beneath it. He imagines the Canadian border as a magical frontier which American men of draft age during the Vietnam era were tempted to cross. Standing on the Minnesota side of the Rainy River, facing north—toward Canada—a young man could turn his back on the United States and the war in Vietnam.

The narrator of "On the Rainy River" is Tim O'Brien, who believed he was a "secret hero." He was sure that "If the stakes ever became high enough—if the evil were evil enough, if the good were good enough— [he] would simply tap a secret reservoir of courage that had been accumulating inside [him] for years" (44). He believed all this up until the summer of 1968 when he received his draft notice and had to decide whether to fight in an unpopular war or go to Canada. He feels trapped by history. A regional and familial legacy of service enfolds him. "There was no happy way out. The government had ended most graduate school deferments; the waiting lists for the National Guard and Reserves were impossibly long; my health was solid; I didn't qualify for CO status—no religious grounds, no history as a pacifist" (47).

Hating the idea of going to war, and loathing his job at a meat packing plant, he leaves a note for his parents and drives north to the Rainy River. Befriended by Elroy Berdahl, the laconic owner of an empty fishing resort, Tim is given a chance to jump from Berdahl's boat and wade into Canada and away from Vietnam. He doesn't take the chance. At the end of the story, he returns home rather than crossing over into Canada. "I passed through towns with familiar names, through the pine forests and down to the prairie, and then to Vietnam, where I was a soldier, and then home again. I survived, but it is not a happy ending. I was a coward. I went to the war" (63). Like the mythic river Styx, the Rainy River is a boundary between life and death.<sup>10</sup> But, as elsewhere in O'Brien's work, the myth is reshaped. The American shore on which the hero stands is associated with war and death, the other shore promises peace and life.

In his most recent novel about Vietnam, *In the Lake of the Woods* (1994), Tim O'Brien once again examines the borderland between the United States and Canada. He uses the Northwest Angle of Minnesota and the Lake of the Woods, with its secret channels and nameless islands as a mystical and magical setting with ironic and iconographic implications. In an ironic reversal of history, O'Brien has his main character, John Wade, flee to Canada *after* the Vietnam War has ended. In the mid- to late-1960s young American men of draft age went to Canada to avoid their future in Vietnam. Two decades later, Wade disappears into Canada because the truth about his past in Vietnam has cost him an election and possibly led him to kill his wife. The confusing and delusive space into which he flees symbolizes the moral wilderness of the Vietnam War, into which Wade, the other men in his platoon, and America had strayed. In what is his most ambiguous narrative about both the Vietnam War and the nature of truth telling, O'Brien uses mystical landscapes and magical plot elements to reveal the self-deception at the core of American self-righteousness.

Like Hemingway in "Big Two-Hearted River," O'Brien writes about the aftermath of war in a setting that seems pacific. Hemingway is supposed to have claimed that "Big Two-Hearted River" was "about the war except [he] left the war out." O'Brien's *In the Lake of the Woods* is about the Vietnam War and John Wade's attempts to distance himself from the ugly truth about his actions in the war. John Wade, the name is meant to evoke images of that most American of cinematic heroes—John Wayne, thinks he can erase his past, that he can take himself out of the war, and leave the war out of his life, but he cannot.

Wade is an amateur magician, a former combat soldier in Vietnam, and a politician. A rising star in Minnesota politics, Wade seems on his way to the United States

Senate until his past catches up with him. When his role in the My Lai massacre surfaces during his campaign for the Senate, Wade loses the election by a wide margin. Following the loss, Wade and his wife, Kathy, escape to that most Minnesotan of retreats, a cottage on a lake. But Wade, whose nickname in Vietnam was “Sorcerer,” cannot make the past disappear and nature offers no escape from history —whether national or personal. What should be an idyllic interlude turns darkly Gothic. Kathy disappears, perhaps scalded and then drowned by her husband. While her death is being investigated, Wade also disappears. He takes a friend’s boat and heads northeast into a snowstorm and a maze of channels —into Canada.

The setting for O’Brien’s novel is Minnesota’s Northwest Angle. The result of a map maker’s error, this appendage of land just north of the 49th parallel juts east from the Manitoba border into the Lake of the Woods and the watery boundary with Ontario. On the first page of the novel, O’Brien describes the boundless space that forms this international border area:

There were no roads at all. There were no towns and no people. Beyond the dock the big lake opened northward into Canada, where the water was everything, vast and very cold, and where there were secret channels and portages and bays and tangled forests and islands without names. Everywhere, for many thousand square miles, the wilderness was all one thing, like a great curving mirror, infinitely blue and beautiful, always the same. (*In the Lake of the Woods* 1)

John and Kathy Wade come to the yellow cottage on the shore of the Lake of the Woods right after John has been buried in a landslide defeat in the primary election. At night, spreading their blankets on the cabin porch, they watch the fog advance across the lake, and listen to the night sounds, to the “rustlings in the timber, things growing, and things rotting,” and try “to be brave” and happy (3). Nature proves no retreat from the world. Like the fog that returns their words to them in “a voice not quite their own” (3), the “great curving mirror” of the wilderness, as if it were a funhouse mirror, reflects back in distorted form whoever stands before it.

Mirrors and magic, reflections and deceptions define John Wade. As his mother says of him, “He was always a secretive boy. I guess you could say he was obsessed with secrets. It was his nature” (8). As a young boy, smarting from his failed attempts to win his alcoholic father’s affection, Wade stands for hours practicing his magic tricks before an old mirror in the basement. The mirror becomes his reality. “In the mirror, where John Wade mostly lived, he could read his father’s mind. Simple affection, for instance. ‘Love you, cowboy,’ his father would think” (65). Standing before the mirror, doing his tricks, imagining a loving father, Wade discovers a way to be happy. The mirror allows him to have love on his terms. When he is away from the mirror, he learns how to recreate it in his head, preferring its imagined reflection to reality.

The power to make things disappear and reappear is not enough for Wade, he longs for the power of invisibility. Not long after he meets Kathy at the University of Minnesota, he begins spying on her. “He felt some guilt at first... but he also found satisfaction in it. Like magic he thought—a quick powerful rush” (32). Her fierce independence, her need for privacy, drives him to shadow her movements. “He liked

melting into crowds, positioning himself in doorways, anticipating her route as she walked across campus. It was sleight-of-body work, or sleight-of-mind... he was carried along the powerful secret thrill of gaining access to a private life" (34).

In 1968, John Wade —a man of mirrors, magic, and secrets— goes to war. He goes, "Not to hurt or to be hurt, not to be a good citizen or a hero or a moral man. Only for love. Only to be loved" (59). Thinking about what he will do in the war, he imagines his father, who had hanged himself when John was fourteen, saying to him, "Well, you did it, you hung in there, and I'm so proud, just so incredibly proud" (59). The men in Charlie Company nickname him Sorcerer. "In Vietnam, where superstition governed, there was a fundamental need to believe —believing just to believe— and over time the men came to trust in Sorcerer's powers" (37). They almost come to believe that he can confer invisibility. When things look bad, they look to him. "Sorcerer's got his magic dust, gonna sprinkle, us good, gonna make us into spooks" (37).

In the horrific fantasy that is Vietnam, Sorcerer discovers a world governed by magic.

It was a place with secret trapdoors and tunnels and underground chambers populated by various spooks and goblins, a place where magic was everyone's hobby and where elaborate props were always on hand —exploding boxes and secret chemicals and numerous devices of levitation— you could *fly* here, you could make *other* people fly —a place where the air itself was both reality and illusion, where anything might instantly become anything else. (72)

Using the "props" at hand —a military radio, artillery fire, and white phosphorous— Sorcerer gathers the people from a village near the South China Sea on the beach and puts on a magic show that ends when he calls in an artillery barrage and makes their village disappear (65).

Vietnam is not only a place where he can work his magic; it is also filled with secrets. "There were secret caches, secret trails, secret codes, secret missions, secret terrors and appetites and longings and regrets. Secrecy was paramount. Secrecy *was* the war" (73). Wade has his own secrets. One of them is "how much he loved the place —Vietnam— how much it felt like home" (73). And there is "the deepest secret of all, which was the secret of Thuan Yen, so secret that he kept it secret from himself" (73).

Among the things that Wade could not make disappear were the memories of what happened at Thuan Yen, a village that was marked on the American military maps as My Lai. There, along with the men of Charlie Company led by Lieutenant William "Rusty" Calley, Wade saw something beyond the madness of war. "This was not madness, Sorcerer understood. This was sin" (107). Wade understands sin, and he also sins. He kills an old man at Thuan Yen, thinking that the man's hoe is a rifle. Later, that same awful day, he finds himself in an irrigation ditch filled with bodies and slime. When PFC Weatherby finds him there, Wade kills Weatherby.

After Thuan Yen, Wade extends his tour for another year. During this second tour in Vietnam, he volunteers for hazardous missions; he tries to erase the horror by burying it "under the weight of many smaller horrors" (148). The trick almost works. "Sometimes he almost forgot" (148). Near the end of this tour, Wade is assigned to

battalion headquarters. Here, he pulls off his greatest disappearing act; he alters the morning reports from Charlie Company and erases himself from the company rolls.

Wade has removed himself from Charlie Company but he cannot erase the demons, and ghosts of Thuan Yen; when he comes home, they travel with him. He has known death and sin, and he doubts there is redemption. As he lies in bed in the cottage, with Kathy beside him, he whispers “Kill Jesus” to himself (271). “Kill Jesus” —kill all possibility of salvation or redemption— he mutters as he creeps out of bed and puts the teakettle on to boil. “Kill Jesus,” he chants as he takes boiling water and empties it on the potted plants in the cottage, cooking them like the napalm had cooked the jungle that hid his secrets. He carries the teapot into the bedroom and watches Kathy sleeping and he can’t “stop the teakettle from tipping itself forward” (273). He remembers that “A dank odor filled the room, a fleshy scalding smell, and Kathy’s knuckles were doing a strange trick on the headboard—a quick rapping, then clenching up, then rapping again like a transmission in code” (273). The rest is conjecture. “Maybe he wrapped her in a sheet... Maybe some black time went by before he carried her down the slope to the dock” and put her into the boat and shoved off (274). “Maybe he whispered magic words” before he weighted her down with rocks and “dispatched her to the bottom” (274). Maybe he did all this before he took Claude Rasmussen’s Chris-Craft and headed out into the Lake of the Woods.

Maybe he did all this, and then again, maybe not. The setting for this novel is a place of dreams and possibilities. “The angle,” O’Brien writes, “makes the dream” (286). It is a place where things and people vanish. “Gorgeous country, yes, but full of ghosts” (286). The angle makes the dream; “the angle shapes reality” (288). “Partly window, partly mirror, the angle is where memory dissolves” (288). This real “lake country” is a deceptive place. If you view the land from a moving boat, the trees seem to move along the shoreline, and one point of land begins to look just like another. One point melts into the other, until there are no sure points of reference. It is a borderland that offers the illusion of peace, the illusion of escape. In the magical landscape of the Northwest Angle, alternative endings are possible, or at least conceivable.

In a final chapter entitled “Hypothesis,” O’Brien offers us an alternative ending in which Wade and his wife disappear together and start their lives over “in some secret country” (301). Then, in a footnote, immediately below this passage, he cancels out the possibility.

My heart tells me to stop right here, to offer some quiet benediction and call it the end. But truth won’t allow it. Because there *is* no end, happy or otherwise. Nothing is fixed, nothing is solved. The facts... finally spin off into the void of things missing, the inconclusiveness of conclusion. Mystery finally claims us... One way or another... we all perform vanishing tricks, effacing history, locking up our lives and slipping day by day into the graying shadows. (301)

We are left with the shadowy image of John Wade turning his stolen boat north into the Lake of the Woods, north toward Canada.

In his four books that confront directly the American war in and against Vietnam, O’Brien uses magical realism to get at the truth of a war that becomes more surreal

the more we learn about it. Bruce Franklin argues in his review of *In the Lake of the Woods* (1994) that O'Brien writes to keep the memory, and the pain of the war alive. He does so because he lives in a nation that is in a hurry to bury its past, to deny its guilt. As Franklin observes, "the denial that O'Brien is dramatizing was given its most succinct statement by President George Bush in his inaugural address: 'The final lesson of Vietnam is that no great nation can long afford to be sundered by a memory'" (44).<sup>11</sup> As things turn out for John Wade, it would have been better for him if he had gone to Canada rather than going to the war. It would have been better if he had disappeared before he found himself in a war in which villages and villagers could be made to disappear. As things turned out for America, it might have been better for the country and for those of us who fought in Vietnam, if more of us had not gone to war.<sup>12</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> O'Brien received the National Book Award in fiction in 1979 for *Going After Cacciato*. In 1990, *The New York Review of Books* selected *The Things They Carried* as one of the best books of the year. In 1994 *The New York Review of Books* selected *In the Lake of the Woods* as one of the best books of the year. *Time Magazine* chose it as the best work of fiction, and the Society of American Historians awarded it the Cooper Prize for the best novel on a historical theme. O'Brien's first novel, *Northern Lights* (1975), also has a Vietnam veteran (Harvey Perry) among its characters. However, this work is more about rural northeastern Minnesota and the struggles of two sons, Harvey and his younger brother, Paul, to come to terms with the stern legacy of their dead preacher father, Pehr Lindstrom Pehri, than it is about the aftermath of Vietnam.

<sup>2</sup> See Freedman, "A Separate Peace" (12 February 1978): 1, 21.

<sup>3</sup> Eric James Schroeder, "Two Interviews: Talks with Tim O'Brien and Robert Stone." *Modern Fiction Studies* 30.1 (Spring 1984): 135-64. O'Brien makes a similar denial in an earlier interview with Larry McCaffery; see "Interview with Tim O'Brien," *Chicago Review* 33 (1982): 129-49.

<sup>4</sup> Among the more familiar of their writings are: Ariel Dorfman, *Pastel de choclo* (Santiago: 1986), translated by Edith Grossman as *Last Waltz in Santiago and Other Poems of Exile and Disappearance* (1988); Gabriel García Márquez, *Cien años de soledad* (Buenos Aires: 1967), translated by Gregory Rabassa as *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (New York: 1971); Jorge Luis Borges, *La muerte y la brújula* (Buenos Aires: 1951), translated as *Death and the Compass* (1993); Isabel Allende, *La casa de los espíritus* (Barcelona: 1988), translated as *The House of the Spirits* (1993).

<sup>5</sup> See Alejo Carpentier, "On the Marvelous Real in America," translated by Tanya Huntington and Lois Parkinson Zamora, in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, ed. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, 88.

<sup>6</sup> See *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, ed. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, 499.

<sup>7</sup> The term "buff" was an acronym for "big ugly fuckers," but it gave the bombers a bovine identity, as if they were the technological alternative to that common beast of burden in Vietnam—the water buffalo.

- <sup>8</sup> Kinney's essay appears in *American Literary History* 7.4 (Winter 1995) 633-53. Her term "American exceptionalism" refers to the prevailing belief in pre- and, to some extent, post-Vietnam era America that the United States remained untainted by the sin of imperialism, that it, almost alone among nations, was an exception to the rule that the strong dominated the weak.
- <sup>9</sup> Tim O'Brien, "The Vietnam in Me," *New York Times Magazine* (2 October 1994): 48-57.
- <sup>10</sup> In *Tim O'Brien* (New York, 1997), Tobey C. Herzog connects the flee or fight theme of "On the Rainy River" to similar themes in *If I Die in a Combat Zone* and *Going After Cacciato*, 116-17.
- <sup>11</sup> See H. Bruce Franklin, "Plausibility of Denial," review of *In the Lake of the Woods*, in *The Progressive* (December 1994): 40-44.
- <sup>12</sup> Portions of this paper were presented at the Modern Language Association meeting in Toronto, Canada, in December 1997. As I did then, I would like to dedicate this paper to my friends who died in Vietnam.

### Works Cited

- Bloom, Harold. *The Anxiety of Influence*. New York: Oxford UP, 1973.
- Carpentier, Alejo. "On the Marvelous Real in America." *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Trans. Tanya Huntington and Lois Parkinson Zamora. Ed. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris. Durham: Duke UP, 1995. 75-88.
- Franklin, H. Bruce. "The Plausibility of Denial." Review of *In the Lake of the Woods*. *The Progressive* (December 1994): 40-44.
- Freedman, Richard. "A Separate Peace". *New York Review of Books* 12 February 1978, 1, 21.
- Herzog, Tobey C. *Tim O'Brien*. New York: Twayne, 1997.
- Jameson, Fredric. *The Political Unconscious*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1983.
- Kinney, Katherine. "American Exceptionalism and Empire in Time O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato*." *American Literary History* 7.4 (Winter 1995): 633-653.
- O'Brien, Tim. *Going After Cacciato*. New York: Delacorte/Lawrence, 1978.
- *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*. New York: Delacorte/Lawrence, 1973.
- *In the Lake of the Woods*. New York: Penguin, 1995.
- *The Things They Carried*. New York: Penguin, 1991.
- "The Vietnam in Me." *The New York Times Magazine* 2 October 1994: 48-57.
- Schroeder, Eric James. "Two Interviews: Talks with Tim O'Brien and Robert Stone." *Modern Fiction Studies* 30.1 (Spring 1984): 135-64.
- Zamora, Lois Parkinson and Wendy B. Faris, eds. *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Durham: Duke UP, 1995.