

Revealing the Flaws in National Narratives through Stories of Individual Trauma:

Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* and Arturo Fontaine's *La vida doble*

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Introduction: trauma and the national narrative

La vida doble (*The Double Life*), Arturo Fontaine's novel about a woman who turned collaborator with the brutal Chilean dictatorship after being tortured, refuses to absolve either the woman or the reader of responsibility for the violence that defined her life. *The Things They Carried*, Tim O'Brien's genre-bending narrative of fighting and surviving the Vietnam War, exposes the violence soldiers both suffered and inflicted, drawing readers into uncomfortable identifications while subtly urging them to consider their own complicity in the waging of war. As trauma survivors who both suffered and inflicted violence, the combat veteran and the female collaborator, or *colaboradora*, illustrate the devastating psychic and moral consequences of state-sanctioned violence, whether at home or abroad. In doing so, they disrupt dominant national narratives that focus on reconciliation and on rebuilding national confidence in the wake of the violent events, rather than fully engaging the divisions and traumas that remain. The individual experiences of the veteran and the *colaboradora* have been either simplified, or relegated to the margins of these national narratives. In Fontaine and O'Brien's texts, individual traumas take center stage, as their protagonists insist on their experiences' national relevance, challenging readers and nations to confront their own complicity in the violence committed during the Vietnam War and the Chilean dictatorship.

The idea of a national narrative follows from Benedict Anderson's influential definition of the nation as "an imagined political community" (B. Anderson 6). To imagine a community, people living in a nation tell stories about their shared origins, values, and future, constructing a narrative. Within the large, diverse community of the nation, dominant power structures promote one unifying narrative, while other groups reject, revise or contest it. Anderson builds on the observation by Ernest Renan in his essay "What is a Nation?" that nations are built on forgetting

certain events, and remembering others. All national narratives rely on selective memory, but not all members of a nation select their memories in the same ways. Any official story leaves tales untold, marginalizing some memories and experiences. In his introduction to *Nation and Narration*, Homi K. Bhabha argues that groups on the cultural or experiential margins of the nation are well-positioned to contest the official narrative:

The marginal or ‘minority’ is not the space of a celebratory, or utopian, self-marginalization. It is a much more substantial intervention into those justifications of modernity - progress, homogeneity, cultural organicism, the deep nation, the long past - that rationalize the authoritarian, ‘normalizing’ tendencies within cultures in the name of the national interest or the ethnic prerogative.” (Bhabha 4)

Groups whose experiences differ from those expressed in the mainstream narrative can, according to Bhabha, question the very validity of that narrative and its values. Simply questioning the narrative does not guarantee its revision, however. For a marginalized group to effect change in the national narrative, it must find a receptive audience in the non-marginalized majority. Trauma survivors constitute a marginalized group with the potential to question and even alter a national narrative, provided the message convinces the mainstream.

Trauma shatters an individual’s identity, leaving a wound on the psyche that may never fully heal. Rape survivor and trauma theorist Kali Tal argues that trauma disrupts “personal myth”: the identity narrative the survivor had previously relied on in living his or her life (Tal 116). Writing can help some survivors rebuild their personal myths (117), but Tal is skeptical of the power of trauma writing to reach non-survivors, who, she insists, can never fully understand the experience of trauma, of having one’s personal myth shattered (122). Cathy Caruth, another trauma theorist, characterizes trauma as “the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available” (Caruth 4). Like Tal, Caruth suggests that trauma confers a kind of privileged knowledge, which leads survivors to tell

their stories to non-survivors who do not have access to that knowledge. In this way, trauma survivors become one of Bhabha's marginalized communities: set apart by their experiences, which others cannot understand, trauma survivors are in a position to expose and contest "the authoritarian, 'normalizing' tendencies" in their nations. The term "survivor" provides the key to understanding *how* trauma changes an individual's relationship to the nation.

Caruth argues that trauma derives not from the traumatic event itself, but from having survived it (60). According to this theory, first proposed by Sigmund Freud, trauma's impact is not fully felt at the time it occurs (61-2). As traumatized individuals struggle to process their experiences, they discover that the event itself poses less of a problem than the difficulty of further living with that event as part of their past. In Caruth's words, "survival becomes for the human being, paradoxically, an endless testimony to the impossibility of living" (62). This "impossibility" is not literal, but suggests a desperation that a phrase such as "very difficult" does not convey.

Synthesizing Caruth's ideas with Tal's, we can recall that in the wake of trauma, survivors find it impossible to maintain their previously held personal myths – though they go on living, they build their lives around a new narrative. Caruth and Tal acknowledge, in different but complementary arguments, that trauma forever alters an individual's sense of self and relationship with the world. *The Things They Carried* and *La vida doble* illustrate this point: narrated by survivors of trauma, from a vantage point decades after the traumatic events themselves, they address not only trauma, but its aftermath, in which the survivors question deeply held notions of individual and national identity.

National trauma is a dubious concept. Tal and Caruth both point to the deeply personal, individual nature of trauma. Tal acknowledges that narratives of personal trauma resonate in a national context, but contends that their impact is limited:

...the survivor comes to *represent* the shattering of our *national* myths, without being able to shatter the reader's individual *personal* myths. And it is those personal myths that support and uphold the most widely accepted national stories. No grand restructuring of national myth can be accomplished without a concurrent destruction of the personal myths that words simply cannot reach. (Tal 121, emphases in original)

According to Tal, only the direct experience of trauma can cause individuals to alter their personal myths, and only by altering their personal myths can individuals alter their conceptions of their nations. Tal's analysis seems to problematically assume that individuals have built their personal myths with reference to the national myths. Although dominant myth-making subjects such as politicians or public intellectuals may identify strongly with their nation-states, many people in the general public maintain an individual identity largely separate from national identity, and may therefore be open to revising national narratives even without personally experiencing trauma. Such an interpretation allows for a more hopeful view than Tal's of the potential for modifying trauma narratives. While accepting her key point that trauma survivors have had uniquely devastating experiences, I argue that stories of trauma *can* significantly affect national narratives.

In part, individual trauma narratives can disrupt national narratives because, in the case of a national event like a war or a dictatorship, all or most members of the nation experienced a diluted form of trauma. In the preface to *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Dominick LaCapra insists on recognizing the differences between survivors and non-survivors of traumatic events, but leaves room for "an important sense in which the aftereffects – the hauntingly possessive ghosts – of traumatic events are not fully owned by anyone and, in various ways, affect

everyone” (ibid). For LaCapra, traumatic events include the Holocaust and modern wars, which have undoubtedly had a lasting impact on many nations. Almost by definition, such events do not have identically traumatizing effects for all who experienced them, yet an event on such a scale does “affect everyone” in some way. LaCapra suggests the term “empathic unsettlement,” allowing for the impact of major national events even on future generations (LaCapra xi).

Similarly, Caruth proposes: “history, like trauma, is never simply one’s own... history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other’s traumas” (Caruth 24). Caruth’s formulation is even more active than LaCapra’s. Not simply affected or unsettled, we are *implicated*, enmeshed in moral and political frameworks that connect a nation’s citizens, traumatized or not, to traumatized individuals. Implication suggests responsibility for and ownership of others’ trauma. Their histories become inextricable from our own.

A meaningful definition of national trauma does not imply that every member of the nation has been deeply traumatized; it implies that the trauma some individuals experienced in connection with national events has unavoidable repercussions for the nation as a whole. From the margins of the official national narrative, the traumatized demand the attention of the non-traumatized. In *The Things They Carried* and *La vida doble*, the protagonists bring their readers’ attention to the traumatic experiences of an American grunt in Vietnam and a *colaboradora* under Pinochet’s dictatorship. O’Brien’s fictional narrative draws upon his own experiences and narrative authority as a trauma survivor. Fontaine, though not himself a victim of the dictatorship, conducted extensive research to ensure the authenticity of his novel. Coming from these different personal backgrounds, both writers have created texts that challenge their national narratives from the margins. Taking advantage of national “empathic unsettlement” over the events that traumatized their protagonists, these texts insist that their readers recognize the

protagonists' traumas as not just personal struggles, but indications of inadequacies in the national narratives that fail to address unresolved national traumas.

Challenges to Chile's reconciliation narrative in *La vida doble*

Dying in a Swedish retirement home, a bitter Chilean woman named Lorena tells a novelist the story of her life. This is the frame for Arturo Fontaine's 2010 novel, *La vida doble*. Once a left-wing militant in the resistance against military dictator Augusto Pinochet, she is captured by state police, or DINA (Dirección de Inteligencia Nacional), in the mid-1970's, and after months of torture, she breaks. Informed that her fake identity has been cracked, as her torturers threaten to kidnap her five-year-old daughter, Lorena agrees to collaborate with the repressive regime. Once the tortured, she becomes the torturer, betraying members of her militant group, Hacha Roja ("Red Axe"), to the state and taking a DINA agent lover. One fateful day, during a raid in search of a left-wing leader, Lorena's old allegiances resurface as she sabotages the operation, finally fleeing into exile. Even after the 1988 plebiscite removes Pinochet from office and Chile begins its transition to democracy, Lorena stays in Sweden. Unwilling or unable to return home, she also remains stubbornly silent, refusing to speak with hopeful journalists whose investigations lead them to this mysterious *colaboradora* – until she agrees to tell the novelist her story. Looking back on her experiences, Lorena offers biting criticisms of both Chile and herself, revealing the deep pain and shattered identity that her traumas have caused her.

Lorena's experiences during the dictatorship were so extreme in their violence and cruelty, both suffered and inflicted, that she has been unable to rejoin Chilean society or accept the narratives of reconciliation that powerful Chilean institutions adopted in the early 1990's.

According to this narrative, the state recognizes victims' suffering without necessarily punishing the perpetrators, and all parties are urged to reconcile so that Chile can leave its pain in the past and enter the 21st century economically and socially strong.

Since Chile's transition to democracy, powerful institutions have promoted a national narrative focused on post-dictatorship reconciliation and stability. In 1990, the first transitional government set up the first Truth and Reconciliation Commission, also known as the Rettig Commission, to hear testimony from surviving political prisoners and relatives of the disappeared. The Rettig Commission gathered evidence of massive human rights violations, and performed the healing work of legitimizing survivors' pain in the eyes of the state. However, its mandate did not extend to punishing perpetrators. Historian Steve J. Stern explains that in the transition from dictatorship, democratic actors working to remove Pinochet from office agreed to laws and institutions that made the pursuit of justice exceedingly difficult (Stern 24-6). Although most Chileans believed that the dictatorship had violated human rights on a massive scale, the prospect of calling the perpetrators to account seemed daunting and dangerous: Pinochet remained in command of the armed forces until 1998, and his supporters inside and outside of the military also wielded considerable power (26). The terms of the transition ensured that the electoral system would disproportionately favor conservatives, while also packing the Senate with Pinochetistas as "designated" members (23). Leftist politicians were forced into distasteful compromises with these political actors. However, even members of the governing liberal coalition, the Concertación, such as President Patricio Aylwin, hoped the government could move past the initial "truth and reconciliation phase" into a period of focusing on economic growth – under the capitalistic principles put in place by Pinochet, which the Concertación essentially agreed to maintain (121).

Stern argues that by the late 1990's, Chile had "arrived at a culture of "memory impasse,"" unable to advance or abandon memory projects about the dictatorship (xxx). In 1998, Pinochet was arrested in London and extradited to Chile. Though he was eventually indicted with various crimes in Chilean courts (251), he was never imprisoned, and he died of natural causes in 2006 (273). Stern, writing in the late 2000's, argues that after Pinochet's arrest, "the structure of impasse unraveled substantially," while worrying that it may someday give way to simple "oblivion" (Stern xxxi). Other studies suggest that the impasse has neither been replaced by oblivion, nor overcome by action. In his 2006 interdisciplinary work on memory narratives in Chile, *Chile in Transition*, Michael J. Lazzara points out that the official consensus politics of the Concertación, the center-left coalition of parties that ran the transitional government until conservative presidential candidate Sebastian Piñera's election in 2010, mask deep internal societal divisions (Lazzara *Chile* 17). In 2011 these divisions rose to the surface as Chile experienced the greatest wave of anti-government protests since the people took to the streets in 1988 to demonstrate against a continuation of the Pinochet dictatorship. Clearly, the efforts at reconciliation of the 1990's have had limited success, leaving many tensions unresolved and wounds open.

Narratives of former leftists' collaboration with the state police, usually after extended periods of torture, expose the regime's worst atrocities and its institutional structure, suggesting a duty to prosecute military actors for their crimes – a duty, as explained above, that has been institutionally almost impossible to fulfill. Moreover, collaborators' dual status as victims and victimizers provokes a volatile mixture of contempt, pity and forgiveness in respondents across the political spectrum, which makes the collaborators and their stories emotionally difficult to

confront. As a result, collaboration has remained on the margins of Chilean national memory narratives, only recently shifting closer to the center.

Between 2002 and 2007, Lazzara conducted extensive interviews with a famous collaborator named Luz Arce, and in 2008 he published the interviews, alongside portions of her testimony to the Rettig Commission, in a Spanish-language book in Chile. In 2011 he published those materials, with the addition of contributions to forums about collaboration in Chile, in English as *Luz Arce and Pinochet's Chile: Testimony in the Aftermath of State Violence*. Lazzara explains that he organized the forums precisely because collaboration is so little discussed in Chile (Lazzara *Luz* 9). He describes the silence around collaboration: “Within the human rights community, and more broadly within Chilean society, the official story has tended to reify the martyred militant, rendering him or her untouchable, while the traitor figure has remained stigmatized, hidden from view...” (1). Lazzara’s study of Arce joins a marginal discourse about this hidden figure which includes works by the *colaboradoras* themselves. In 1993, Arce, one of three well-known *colaboradoras*, published her testimonial memoir, *El infierno (The Inferno)*. Marcia Alejandra Merino, another of the collaborators, also published a memoir in 1993, titled *Mi verdad (My truth)*, and was the subject of a documentary by Carmen Castillo, *La Flaca Alejandra (Skinny Alejandra)* in the same year.¹ Arce and Merino both testified in 1990 before the Rettig Commission. Arce especially became a well-known public figure, eliciting compassion in people who viewed her as another victim of the dictatorship, and disgust in those who considered her a traitor (Stern, *Reckoning*, 79-80).²

¹ Fontaine includes both memoirs and the documentary in the list of sources at the back of his novel.

² The third famous collaborator, María Alicia Uribe Gómez, alias “Carola,” has not had the same public presence as her peers. Arce speculates, in her interview with Lazzara, that Carola stayed in her job with military intelligence until retirement, and remained silent after retirement, because she never overcame her terror of her captors/employers (Lazzara *Luz* 87).

Despite the stigma attached to her collaboration, Luz Arce openly joined the narrative of national truth-telling and reconciliation that dominated Chile in the early 1990's. *El infierno* describes in detail the months of physical, sexual and psychological torture she endured, and attempts to understand and explain how she became a collaborator. While accepting responsibility and expressing her shame and guilt for having become a functionary of the DINA and joined in state repression, she also highlights her ongoing victim status, controlled by an apparatus she felt unable to escape. Arce's confessional testimonial style, which includes many names, dates, and facts, reflects the memoir's partial origin in the sense of social and legal duty which led her to testify in front of the Rettig Commission and in many subsequent court cases (Arce 326). Her confession is also framed by her newly found Catholic faith. Themes of forgiveness and reconciliation dominate Arce's reflections on her experiences, as she strives to forgive her victimizers and asks forgiveness from those she herself victimized.³ A preface by a Dominican priest lends this narrative the authority of the Church. Aligned with these two institutions, the Rettig Commission and the Catholic Church, Arce stakes her claim to a place in the national narrative of reconciliation.

Diamela Eltit, a Chilean artist, novelist and essayist, considers Arce's story vital to post-dictatorship Chile but criticizes her embrace of the reconciliatory narrative. Eltit admits to being gripped by these texts: "a part of my being was powerfully engaged with those stories" (62);⁴ and

³ In her introduction to *The Inferno*, Arce writes, "I have said that I ask for forgiveness, but I don't expect it" (Arce xix). (I cite from Stacey Alba Skar's translation of *El infierno*.) Arce particularly treasures the forgiveness of Erika Hennings, a woman whose husband disappeared while they were both being held in a detention center where Luz worked (333-4). Arce demonstrates her own capacity for forgiveness by forgiving even notorious torturer Osvaldo Romo Mena, deciding that although he committed terrible acts, his superiors wronged him by giving him the role of torturer (125). For a detailed discussion of Arce and forgiveness, see Lazzara, *Chile in Transition*, Chapter 2: "The Poetics of Reconciliation."

⁴ "una parte de mi ser estaba fuertemente comprometida con esas historias." Translations of Eltit are my own. There is no adequate one-word translation for the Spanish verb "comprometer" in this context. In addition to engagement, the word suggests a politically tinted *commitment*, particularly salient in the context of the dictatorship.

she expresses consternation at the minor impact of their publication: “The books I will deal with occupied in Chile an alarmingly minor space of reception, almost nonexistent ...” (ibid).⁵ Even though Luz Arce was a relatively famous figure, thanks to her testimony before the Rettig Commission, her memoir was not widely read. Eltit compares Arce and Merino to chameleons: after acquiring power in militant left-wing organizations, they did the same within the DINA, and with *The Inferno* and *Mi verdad* attempt to integrate themselves into the new democratic power structure by writing themselves into the post-dictatorship narrative of reconciliation (Eltit 49, 73). Reducing their motives to the pursuit of power, Eltit rejects the possibility that their professions of guilt and desire to help human rights investigations could be sincere, and excludes them from the dominant narrative of reconciliation. She concludes that their memoirs “can only be read as the history and the hysteria of two traitors” (75).⁶ Although Eltit deplores the lack of attention the works received in Chile, she herself thus advocates a marginalizing reception for them, condemning and even pathologizing the women as hysterical traitors whose stories should not substantively impact the national narrative.⁷

Collaboration, however, arguably pervaded dictatorship society far more than the dominant narrative admits. Several of the contributors to Lazzara’s forum, themselves former political prisoners and torture survivors, acknowledge that collaboration was a fairly widespread phenomenon among captured left-wing militants. According to survivor Pedro Matta, many if not most prisoners provided some information after hours of torture (Lazzara *Luz* 153). Lazzara,

⁵ “Los libros que abordaré ocuparon en Chile un espacio de recepción alarmantemente minoritario, casi inexistente...”

⁶ “[Quiero decir que] sólo pueden ser leídas como la historia y la histeria de dos traidoras.”

⁷ Luz Arce burst again into the public consciousness in 2011 when the Valech Commission included her name on a new list of victims of the dictatorship. In a column for the Chilean newspaper *La Nación*, Carlos Ernesto Sánchez describes how he came to accept this classification despite his own reservations, demonstrating that Arce remains a polemic figure. Another recent example of public engagement with *colaboradoras* is Ximena Carrera’s play *Medusa*, which began running in Chile in 2010 and is still being performed. The play is a fictionalization of the lives of Arce, Merino and Uribe, set in the apartment they all shared while working for the DINA.

in response to a question I emailed him about the status of Arce, Merino and Uribe in Chile

today, offers an even broader definition of the concept of collaboration:

My feeling is that they [Arce et al] are simply vestiges of a reality of collaboration that was endemic to Chilean society. This collaboration had to do not just with militants who talked under torture, but also with a widespread network of civilians and institutions who tacitly or overtly upheld the neoliberalization of Chile and the extermination of the left. (Lazzara “Re: Echoes”)

Under Lazzara’s wider conception of collaboration, moderate democratic politicians who have striven to exchange the pain of discussing the dictatorship for the shared enjoyment of economic growth may be considered collaborators with Pinochet’s legacy, as well as, perhaps, former collaborators with his regime. The *colaboradoras*’ narratives expose the workings of the military dictatorship, which relied not only on the active collaboration of agents such as Luz Arce, but on the passive collaboration of citizens whose action and inaction allowed Pinochet to control Chile for seventeen years. The case can be made, then, that the *colaboradoras*’ experiences indicate societal dynamics beyond the torture chamber, their guilt and their victimization only extreme cases of a national phenomenon. *La vida doble* makes this case.

In *La vida doble*, Fontaine offers a substantial revision of the figure of the *colaboradora*. In fact, his text engages in self-conscious dialogue with existing narratives of collaboration. When Lorena refers to Dante’s *Inferno*, as she often does, it is difficult not to think of Arce’s *Inferno*. These references remind informed readers of Luz Arce’s suffering, and support her characterization of the experience of collaboration as a living hell. At one point Lorena refers to her own truth – “mi verdad” – and *Mi verdad* is the title of Merino’s testimonial work. These are oblique references, but at one startling moment, halfway through the novel, Lorena indicates her awareness of the real life collaborators: “I know now that there were others. We know because they’ve confessed in writing and with courage. They repented and they collaborated with the

justice system. Good for them. I don't judge" (Fontaine 166).⁸ Prior to this moment, it seemed that Lorena was a stand-in for the real-life *colaboradora* figures, in a sort of parallel Chilean universe. By including Arce and company in his diegetic world, Fontaine gives Lorena the chance to comment directly on their narratives, to revise them. Although Lorena says she does not judge the *colaboradoras*, she describes their *post*-dictatorship actions with the verb "collaborate." Though collaboration can have positive connotations, in the context of this narrative it should give readers pause. Her word choice implies a judgment similar to Eltit's: by joining the narrative of reconciliation, the *colaboradoras* have merely adjusted, chameleon-like, from one type of collaboration to another.

Lorena goes on to distinguish between her mode of collaboration and that of the other women. She judges herself more harshly, she says, because she knows how invested she became in the DINA's mission to exterminate the militants: "Lorena has set out to annihilate them. When this finishes and she gets out, let there be nobody left to reckon with her. I collaborated with the repression, and I enjoyed doing it" (ibid).⁹ Referring to herself in the third person in an atypical narrative move, Lorena hints at her fractured identity (which I will address in more detail below). First, she seems to distance herself from those past actions. Switching to first-person narration, she then claims responsibility for her perpetration of violence. Even though she now looks back in horror on what she did, she will not divorce herself from that past self in the same way that many Chileans have divorced themselves from their support or their tolerance of Pinochet.

Lorena thus differs from the real-life *colaboradoras* who inspired her creation in that she rejects the reconciliatory narrative, refusing to forgive herself or others for her violence. Though

⁸ "Ya sé que hubo otros y otras. Sabemos porque lo han confesado por escrito y con valor. Se arrepintieron y colaboraron con la justicia. Bien por ellas. No juzgo." Translations of Fontaine are my own.

⁹ "Lorena se ha propuesto aniquilarlos. Que cuando esto termine y ella salga no quede ninguno que pueda pedirle cuentas. Yo colaboré con la repre y lo hice con ganas."

she initially claims to be a reluctant narrator, it becomes apparent that she tells her story out of a determination to add her truth to the narrative around the dictatorship. Fontaine seems to join Eltit in questioning the legitimacy of focusing on forgiveness for the *colaboradoras*' and others' actions, but his text does not echo Eltit's argument that the *colaboradoras* should be relegated to the margins of the national narrative. Lorena's story reveals that the premature narrative of reconciliation dangerously ignores the lessons of the *colaboradoras*' experiences.

Lorena argues forcefully for the recognition that military institutions created conditions in which anybody could become a perpetrator or victim of violence, guiding her readers towards a realization that however extreme her experiences, they grew organically out of the social framework all Chileans inhabited during the dictatorship. She painfully describes the dehumanizing space of the torture chamber, but rejects the notion that the torturers are villains. In one passage about being tortured, she compares herself to an ox, a slug, a snail and a horse, and her torturers call her a bitch (Fontaine 138-9). As for the torturers, one has the evocative nickname "el Rata" – the Rat – and after describing her ordeal she asks: "How the hell do they find animals like these guys?" (140).¹⁰ She answers her own question by restoring humanity even to the sadistic individuals who tortured her, insisting that the structure of the military dictatorship made their actions possible: "Once a space of limited impunity has been established – because there are limits, there is a system, the shit-show isn't pure chaos – that monster we carry inside, that beast that feeds on human flesh, is unleashed in the good father, in the family daughter" (ibid).¹¹ Everyone, Lorena insists, has the potential to act monstrously. To further encourage her readers into problematic identifications with characters who perpetrate violence, she reveals

¹⁰ "¿Cómo mierda encuentran animales como éstos?"

¹¹ "Establecido el lugar de la impunidad delimitada – porque hay límites, hay sistema, la huevá no es un puro caos – se desata en el buen padre, en la hija de familia ese monstruo que llevamos dentro, esa fiera que se ceba con la carne humana." In my translation I often opt for contractions to convey the informal, oral nature of the text.

across the narrative that even the worst torturers have a human side. At the very least, they uniformly adore their children, just as she does. Lorena became a collaborator when her torturers threatened the safety of her five-year-old daughter, Anita. By mentioning other torturers' children she suggests how parents' need to protect their children may lead them to keep distasteful jobs and strive to stay in favor with the powerful military state. Put in a similar situation, she implies, any Chilean might have tortured, or failed to object to torture.

If we take Lorena at her word early in the interview, she has no special desire to add her voice to the national narrative. In fact, she claims to hate telling her life story, full of torture and violence. As she describes the early days of imprisonment and torture, she expresses her ambivalence about the narrative project, "For years I've kept this to myself, as it worked away at me from the inside. I didn't want to talk about it. I didn't want the obscenity of degrading everything with a detailed description. I didn't want it. I'm the one who does what I don't want to do. That's me" (21).¹² The last two sentences could easily apply to her days collaborating with Pinochet's torturers. That she tacks them onto her self-identification as reluctant narrator suggests that Lorena sees her interview experience as another violation of her agency and freedom, somehow comparable to those long-ago scenes of torture and rape. In contrast to those experiences, she could stop the interview if she chose, and in fact she twice tells the interviewer they should stop – but she keeps talking (24, 36). Over the course of the interview, she refers several more times to the pain or uncertainty she feels while talking about her life, but no longer threatens to stop talking.

At the end of the novel, the reader learns that the novelist promised Lorena payment for the interview: "And? Have I earned my money yet? Here's a secret: with what you're giving me

¹² "Llevo años con esto guardado y trabajándome por dentro. No quería hablar de esto. No quería la obscenidad de la descripción detallada que todo lo rebaja. No quería. Yo soy la que hace lo que no quiero. Esa soy yo."

for my story today I have thirty thousand dollars. Inheritance for Anita. A nice sum, don't you think? ...So here I am, telling you my damn story" (299).¹³ Lorena thus frames her interview as a purely economic transaction, suggesting again that she does not particularly care about adding to the national narrative. Ricardo Leiva, reviewing *La vida doble* for the prominent Chilean newspaper *La tercera*, takes Lorena at her word and cites her mercenary streak as further evidence of her contemptibility as a human being.¹⁴ To take Lorena at her word, however, is to overlook the subtleties of her character and of Fontaine's text. If only money motivated her, she could have made such a deal long ago, as she informs her interviewer: "You got lucky. If you had come to see me earlier I would have given you the same answer I gave the others: not half a word about that" (37).¹⁵ Something besides money must have convinced her to talk.

Whatever she may say to the contrary, Lorena does believe her personal history can enrich and perhaps, in a sense, correct the national narrative around the dictatorship, and she does want to speak. After mentioning the previous would-be interviewers, Lorena explains that she is dying, implying that the cancer drives her to tell her story. She goes on to give the narrator her opinion of the nature and use of the interview:

Nobody can understand this story. And nobody would want to. It's useless. The edifying fable with its moral will remain, the shell of the facts will remain, the pornography of horror. That's already known. But what gave them sense, what made them human, dies with us. I

¹³ "¿Y? ¿Me he ganado ya mi platita? Un secreto: con lo que tu me darás por mi historia hoy completo treinta mil dólares. Herencia para Anita. Bonita suma, no te parece?...Así es que aquí estoy, contándote mi puta historia."

¹⁴ Leiva writes: "Al cabo de las cinco horas pactadas de conversación, Irene exige su recompensa y despide bruscamente a su visitante. Lo que éste haga con sus notas y grabaciones le da lo mismo. A Irene no le interesa ni el indulto ni la comprensión. Sólo quiere plata." ("At the end of the agreed-upon five hours of conversation, Irene demands her compensation and bids her visitor an abrupt goodbye. She does not care what he does with his notes and recordings. Irene is not interested in forgiveness or understanding. She only wants money.") Leiva considers the novel an unpleasant read because all of the characters are somehow lost, except for Anita; its most tolerable moment, he declares, is when it ends. Without disputing the horrors contained in the novel's pages, I respectfully disagree with Leiva's pessimistic reading. I believe that rather than arguing for the inhumanity of all his characters, which would indeed be deeply depressing, Fontaine points out the humanity they all share.

¹⁵ "Has tenido suerte. Si hubieras llegado a verme tiempo atras te habría contestado lo mismo que a los otros: de eso, ni media palabra."

don't know how you'll use what I tell you. *My curiosity is piqued*. I don't know if it will help you. I don't think that a novel should repeat reality... People love history that confirms prejudice. Recognizing what the TV has already shown them: they like that. The truth is too disquieting, prickly, contradictory and scary. The truth is immoral. It shouldn't be printed. *You will not write what I tell you.* (39, emphases mine)¹⁶

Lorena suggests a moral, rather than financial, narrative duty when she says, "what made them human, dies with us." It is not entirely clear to whom "they" and "us" refer in this context, but the pronouns could encompass the extremists on both sides of the conflict, who Lorena describes and deconstructs in detail throughout her interview. Suddenly her mortality seems the impetus for her to speak, not because she wants to add to an inheritance for Anita, but because the story will die with her. Even as she insists that nobody would want to read the novel and her interviewer will not really write it, Lorena admits her curiosity about the finished product. By the end of the interview she has lost track of time: "What time is it? Wow! The five hours we agreed on are already over. Give me my money and clear off" (300).¹⁷ Had she only cared for the cash, she would have been unlikely to become so involved in her narrative project.

Lorena's comments over the course of the interview suggest that she tells her story for the benefit of Chile's next generation, as personified by her interviewer, her daughter, and the eventual readers of the novel. She grants the interview in an act of optimism, hoping that she might convince readers of a historical truth beyond what they have seen on the television: politicians urging reconciliation and the burial of the difficult recent past in favor of focusing on the economic present and future. Her first words to the interviewer, and by extension the reader,

¹⁶ "Nadie puede comprender esta historia, Y nadie lo querría. Es inútil. Quedará la fibula edificante con su moraleja, quedara la cáscara de los hechos, la pornografía del horror. Eso ya se sabe. Pero lo que les dio un sentido, lo que los hizo humanos, muere con nosotros. No sé como usarás lo que te cuento. Me pica la curiosidad. No sé si te servirá de algo. No creo que una novela deba repetir la realidad. ... La gente ama la historia que confirma el prejuicio. Reconocer lo que ya les mostró la tele: eso gusta. La verdad es demasiado inquietante, espinuda, contradictoria y espantosa. La verdad es inmoral. No debe imprimirse. Tu no escribirás lo que te cuente."

¹⁷ "¿Qué hora es? Caramba! Ya se pasaron las cinco horas que habíamos acordado. Dame mi platita y lárgate."

highlight the importance of the reception of her story: “Could I tell you the truth? That is a question for you. Will you believe me or not? Only you can answer that. What I can do is talk.”¹⁸ (11). Lorena recognizes the key role that her listener will play in interpreting her story, and her own limited power to make him believe what she tells him. More important than her ability to tell the truth, then, is her ability to tell it *to the novelist*, and his ability to hear and believe it. Later in the interview, Lorena explicitly speaks to the extent to which she tailors her narrative to the interviewer’s attentive ear, even casting her own truthfulness into doubt: “As for me, I don’t give a damn about the truth. Am I telling you the truth when I tell you I don’t give a damn about the truth? It’s my story. But, does such a thing exist? As I speak to you, I look at you and I calibrate your reactions. What I’m telling you is intended for you”¹⁹ (285). She goes on to mention that these calibrations take into account his intention to write a novel. The ever-slippery issue of truth again comes to the fore, but so does the importance of the interviewer in shaping Lorena’s message. Lorena is not telling – perhaps cannot tell – her story simply as she sees it, but instead tells it in the way she thinks will most affect her interviewer and his readers.²⁰

¹⁸ “Podría yo decirte la verdad? Esa es una pregunta para ti. Me vas a creer o no? A eso solo respondes tú. Lo que yo sí puedo hacer es hablar.”

¹⁹ “Lo que es a mí, la verdad me importa un carajo. ¿Te digo la verdad cuando te digo que la verdad me importa un carajo? Es mi historia. Pero, ¿existirá tal cosa? Mientras te hablo, te miro y calibro tus reacciones. Lo que te voy contando esta pensado para ti.”

²⁰ Lorena’s daughter, Anita, plays a subtle but crucial role in shaping the narrative. Their relationship suggests the barriers to communication between the generation of survivors of the dictatorship, and that generation’s children. Even before becoming a collaborator, Lorena realizes that she owes her daughter an explanation for her actions as a militant. Having already been arrested and tortured, aware that rejoining the militant struggle would endanger herself and her family, she nonetheless chooses to rejoin. The explanatory note she leaves when she goes away ends like this: “Mom, I’m sorry, but you’ll have to explain it to Anita. I hope someday she can forgive me” (“Mamá, perdona, pero deberás explicárselo a Anita. Ojalá algún día pueda perdonarme”) (75). Lorena avoids a face to face confrontation with her five-year-old, leaving her mother to explain why she will not be coming home. Yet Lorena hopes for Anita’s forgiveness someday. Given that Lorena chooses to collaborate at least in part because her torturers threaten her daughter’s safety, the reader might think forgiveness or understanding could be forthcoming. Near the end of the interview, however, Lorena tells her interviewer that nobody, not even her daughter, will understand her story. She goes on to explain: “I never wanted to tell her the story, such as it was. Too crude for her. I thought: I don’t want to make her suffer. Also: some day she should know the truth, I am her mother. Some day. I never found the right moment. Until now” (“Sabe poco de esto. Nunca quise contarle la historia tal como fue.

To return to the terminology of Kalí Tal, traumatic experiences have severely disrupted Lorena's personal myth, causing her to alter her view of the national myth as well, whereas most of her readers lack the traumatic experiences that would effect similar changes in their own ideas. In possession of this terrible yet privileged knowledge, Lorena inhabits Bhabha's marginal space with respect to the national narrative. For her stories and her opinions to enter the mainstream, she must convince non-survivors, non-marginal actors, of their relevance. In further recognition of the interviewer's power to validate or dismiss her claims, she admits that she prepared for the interview, making sure to have an old Hacha Roja document on hand to support her account of the organization (125). As she continues to describe the militant group, she cites numbers and types of weapons, and names specific incidents in which she was not even involved (127). Briefly, she seems to share Luz Arce's preoccupation with truth-telling, presenting evidence as if she, too, were testifying in court. Having anticipated the kind of proof the novelist might require, she offers that proof in an attempt to bridge the gap between her marginal space and his and his readers' central space in the national narrative.

Lorena tells a story of the traumatic destruction of her identity, which remains damaged and unstable throughout most of the text, indicating the failure of the national narrative of reconciliation to address her experiences. *La vida doble* thus presents a reading of the collaborator-survivor that differs starkly from that presented by Luz Arce, which focuses on redemption and the rebuilding of identity. *El infierno* begins with the words, "My name is Luz Arce. It has been very difficult for me to recover that name" (Arce xix). The opening recalls

Demasiado cruda para ella. Pensé: no quiero hacerla sufrir. También: algún día debe conocer la verdad, soy su madre. Algún día. Nunca me llegó el momento. Hasta ahora") (299). These words cast a new light on the interview. Perhaps Lorena agrees to speak to this novelist, the last of a string of hopefuls who were bluntly turned down, not to earn money, but to indirectly speak to her semi-estranged daughter. Anita inherits not just \$30,000, but the chance to learn her mother's story. Ultimately, the next generation will judge Lorena.

Arce's testimony in front of the Rettig Commission, and anticipates the narrative of destruction and recovery that will follow. By contrast, Lorena's name appears in the second paragraph of *La vida doble* – or rather, one of her names appears. A *compañero*²¹ shouts her militant name, Irene, on the day the police first capture her. Twenty-six pages into the story, after describing her capture and torture at the hands of Pinochet's secret police, the narrator identifies herself to her interviewer in an elusive way: "Call me Lorena. Not Irene. I want to be your Lorena. You will never know my real name. I live here in Stockholm with a fake name and fake documents. I'm sick with cancer, I am, as they say, at the end of my days" (37).²² Unlike Arce, Lorena has not settled on a strong, stable identity. Rather than say what her name is, what she calls herself, she says what she wants to be called by others. She could be inventing her militant name, or her present name, or both, as far as we know. Each of her identities is linked to a specific set of people and interests: her revolutionary *compañeros* call her Irene; the people she tortures know her as Consuelo Frías Zaldívar, nicknamed "la Cubanita," the false identity given her by the DINA; and to her interviewer, she is Lorena – his Lorena.²³

Near the end of the interview, Lorena hints that she has been able to reconstruct some private sense of self. However, she deliberately maintains a fractured public identity which points to the failure of the reconciliation narrative to incorporate her. Lorena claims to draw her truest identity from the moment at which, on an operation with the state police, she broke orders and killed a high-level militant rather than facilitate his capture and torture. After this act of

²¹ *Compañero* means "comrade" in the Communist sense, but also "friend" or "companion." In Lorena's narrative, as in many other narratives of left-wing movements, all three meanings typically apply. Since any translation to just one of them would be misleading, I use the Spanish word when appropriate.

²² "Llámame Lorena. No Irene. Yo quiero ser tu Lorena. Nunca sabrás mi nombre real. Vivo aquí en Estocolmo con un nombre ficticio y documentación ficticia. Estoy enferma de cáncer, estoy, como dicen, "en las últimas.""

²³ My own decision to refer to this character as Lorena whenever possible reflects my interpretive bias. Because I am interested in the project of remembering and narrating the events of the dictatorship, I prefer to deal with the narrator, the woman in Stockholm. Since she wants her listener to call her Lorena, I am willing to oblige her as well.

solidarity with the left, she had to escape the DINA and go into exile, but she also rediscovered a shred of the integrity she thought she had lost: “I did not manage to be the combatant I had promised myself I’d be. ...I tried and I couldn’t. ... But I was myself, myself alone, even though nobody knew, the one who prevented them from putting el Hueso in el Gato’s hands. I knew what that was” (300).²⁴ Briefly Lorena seems to value her own private identity above all else, but she finally returns to the issue of her identity in others’ eyes: “Do you know who the woman is who’s talking to you? I am a question for you. I am your Lorena, that’s all” (300).²⁵ Lorena wants to remain a question, open to interpretation by the novelist and his readers. She emphasizes again that she is *the novelist’s* Lorena, that he *owns* her in some way. In Caruth’s terminology, he is implicated in her trauma, and so are his readers. When Lorena invites him to strive to understand her, she confronts him with the fact that her supposedly individual trauma implicates him, and other Chileans, in a web of guilt and responsibility.

Lorena defines herself in relation to her dictatorship experiences, illustrating the theory that stories about trauma are really stories about surviving trauma. Moreover, the elderly Lorena who narrates her trauma understands it as a disruption of her personal myth, indeed a mortal blow to the identity she previously held. Such a narrative of trauma challenges the dominant national agenda of reconciliation and moving forward. For Lorena, the traumas began the day the state police killed her friend and occasional lover Canelo, and captured her: “I was dying without knowing it yet. Not, of course, like Canelo, who remained fixed and immobile in the eternity of heroes. But I knew that sister Irene had also fallen that day in Moneda street and the person who

²⁴ “No logré ser la combatiente que me había prometido ser. [“Por la causa, todo, Irene: todo.” No fui capaz de cumplir esa máxima. Ya lo sabes.] Traté y no pude. [Después hice lo que hice contra mis hermanos.] Pero fui yo, yo sola, aunque nadie lo sepa, la que impidió que ellos pusieran al Hueso en manos del Gato. Yo sabía lo que era eso.”

²⁵ “¿Sabes quién es la mujer que te habla? Soy una pregunta para ti. Soy tu Lorena, nada más.” Although “nada más” literally translates to “nothing more,” it often expresses a more casual, colloquial sense of finality that I believe translates better here to “that’s all.”

had killed her had been me” (14).²⁶ Canelo represents the martyr she should have been, the heroic act she should have committed, and is thus a kind of double for her. Over the course of the interview, her self-reproach often contrasts, explicitly or implicitly, with the example of the good militant Canelo (15, 18, 121). With the bitter knowledge that she could, perhaps should, have died a “heroic” death, she wrestles with the existential ramifications of her survival: “I chose to survive. Did I choose? Can one?” (18).²⁷ Later, she again “chose” survival by collaborating rather than dying in the torture chamber. She questions the notion that in life-or-death situations, an individual can make rational choices. Responsibility for her collaboration and survival, then, at least in part lies with the dictatorship institutions that generated those life-or-death situations.

Christianity, with its emphasis on forgiveness and rebirth, could have helped Lorena rebuild her identity and enter a national narrative of reconciliation – just as it helped Luz Arce – but Lorena rejects this path. Not herself a believer, Lorena uses religion metaphorically, relies on a vast number of intertextual references that directly or indirectly involve religion, and often mocks religious ideals (53). Typically, Lorena uses religious imagery to unfavorably frame her discussion of the doomed militant struggle. Although the dictatorship and its torturers receive most of her rage and scorn, she reserves some for the movement that she betrayed. Lorena describes herself and her *compañeros* as religious fanatics by another name, studying Marxist philosophy with “apostolic dedication” (93).²⁸ Referring to Che Guevara’s notion of the ideal revolutionary, she writes, “what was the New Man or the New Woman? Wasn’t it Paul and his

²⁶ “...moría sin saberlo todavía. No, por supuesto, como Canelo, que quedó fijo e inmóvil en la eternidad de los héroes. Pero yo sabía que también la hermana Irene había caído ese día en la calle Moneda y quien la había matado había sido yo.”

²⁷ “Elegí sobrevivir. ¿Elegí? ¿Se puede?”

²⁸ “dedicación apostólica.”

Christian Messianism again?” (ibid).²⁹ Even the most die-hard Communist revolutionary, Lorena tells her interviewer, is driven by a variation of the religious faith he repudiates. Lorena also describes the left-wing militants who resisted Pinochet as would-be religious martyrs caught in a pointless, unwinnable conflict, bitterly comparing Salvador Allende to a “revolutionary” Christ (123). Religious principles and behaviors yield only sorrow and death, she implies, as she mocks her movement for its secular piety.

As a collaborator, Lorena explains, she learned to think of her work as “a kind of habitual vengeance against them and against myself. Against my brothers for... having made me believe in a utopia with no fate but defeat, and against myself for having let myself be sweet-talked by a religion that, like all of them, was nothing but a death cult” (157).³⁰ With this bitter talk of revenge, Lorena channels the darkest feelings of her time of collaboration, blurring the limits between what she felt back then, and what she may still feel as an old woman in exile. Lorena may or may not still consider all religions to be death cults. Any theme of forgiveness that Arce drew from Christianity apparently holds no appeal for Lorena, who never asks forgiveness from anybody, except perhaps her only child. Nor does she indicate that she has forgiven anybody. One struggles to imagine a Dominican priest writing a preface for *this* book.

By keeping her in a state of fractured identity and self-loathing, Fontaine has been cruel to his character. Lorena does not enjoy the hard-won, relative peace and comfort that Luz Arce claims to have achieved through her work with the Rettig Commission and the Catholic Church. Lorena’s time of exile is miserable, marked by depression and alienation as she drives away everyone she loves. The basis for her ongoing psychic self-punishment lies not in her actions but

²⁹ “Entonces, ¿qué era el Hombre Nuevo y la Mujer Nueva? ¿No era Pablo y su mesianismo cristiano de nuevo?”

³⁰ “una forma de venganza habitual contra ellos y contra mí. Contra mis hermanos [por no haber querido captar que nos iban a agarrar de las pestañas,] por haberme hecho creer en una utopia sin mas destino que la derrota, y contra mí por haberme dejado engatusar por una religión que, como todas, no era sino un culto a la muerte.”

in her motivations as a collaborator, and motivations are exactly what we can never be certain we understand about other human beings. Whatever Luz Arce or Marcia Alejandra Merino may write, there will always be some who, like Eltit, doubt their sincerity. Lorena's unwillingness to forgive herself suggest that Arce may not deserve the forgiveness she has sought and occasionally been granted. Conversely, Lorena's story might suggest that she judges herself too harshly. She did, after all, save el Hueso from capture, if only by killing him, and she seems to consider this her one redemptive act. Fontaine's text exposes the problematic nature of a reconciliatory narrative. At the same time, Lorena's state of agony and inability to forgive or to reconcile with anybody – least of all herself – hardly offer a feasible alternative for an entire nation. How to remember and narrate Chile's dictatorship must lie somewhere in between the dominant narrative and Lorena's marginal one. Lorena remains, to the last, “a question for you.”

“I want you to feel what I felt”: Tim O'Brien exposes the fallacy of a “noble” Vietnam War

The Things they Carried follows Alpha Company, a platoon of American combat soldiers, through Quang Ngai Province at the height of the Vietnam War, and past the war's end to the surviving soldiers' struggles to make sense of their experiences. Not quite a novel, the “work of fiction,” as it is subtitled, grew in part out of Tim O'Brien's memories of his year fighting in Vietnam, but owes even more of its content to his imagination and to two decades spent processing the war.³¹ When *The Things They Carried* appeared in bookstores in 1990, seventeen years after the official end of the longest war America had ever waged, the public, too, was still processing Vietnam, in Hollywood, literature and politics. In the years after the war, dominant socio-political forces constructed a national narrative of American superiority and

³¹ In a 1990 interview with Michael Coffey for *Publisher's Weekly*, O'Brien said: “of the whole time I spent there [Vietnam] I remember maybe a week's worth of stuff” (qtd. in Ringnalda 104).

selective amnesia, over the dissenting voices of many combat veterans and other objectors. The carefully crafted tales of trauma in *The Things They Carried* expose the fallacy of any narrative that presents the Vietnam War as either noble or forgettable.

The tone and message of *The Things They Carried* fundamentally contradict the national narrative of the Vietnam War that politicians had been repeating for over a decade prior to its publication. This dominant narrative holds that whether the war was a “noble cause” or, as some liberals successfully argued during the 1970’s, a mistake, nobody bore moral responsibility for the atrocities carried out by and against U.S. soldiers in Vietnam (Gibson 5). In his introduction to *Facing My Lai: Moving Beyond the Massacre*, David Anderson argues that the war in Vietnam “began for the leaders and the soldiers as a continuation of the nation’s presumed role as a champion of good and opponent of evil,” a role the United States adopted after World War II (D. Anderson 15). By the end of the Vietnam War, reports of the My Lai massacre and other acts of violence against civilians in Vietnam seriously problematized this notion of superiority (ibid). In his 1988 book *The Perfect War*, James William Gibson characterizes the 1970’s and early 1980’s as a time when wider society, exhausted by years of domestic conflict over the war, avoided discussing Vietnam in any meaningful way (Gibson 4-6). Although survivors (including O’Brien) published works that questioned the dominant narrative of American nobility and superiority, exposing the horrors of the war, their work made little impact (ibid). As the 1980’s wore on, the trend continued: “questions of responsibility for American involvement were assiduously avoided” (6). Historian H. Bruce Franklin argues that the dominant narrative about American involvement in Vietnam is predicated on denial of the most damning facts of the conflict, which facilitates the avoidance of responsibility (Franklin 25). President Ronald Reagan shamelessly promoted a “pseudohistory” of the Vietnam War that denied the United States’ role

as an aggressor, in order to convince Americans that the war had been “a noble cause” (29).

Powerful political forces promoted this questionable narrative of American moral righteousness in the war.

The Things They Carried also challenges the national narrative on its assertion, in the late 1980’s, that Americans should put the war behind them, forgetting the pain and divisiveness it caused at home, so that the nation could rebuild national confidence and military strength. Preparing for the First Gulf War, President George H.W. Bush showed hyperawareness of the legacy of the Vietnam War hanging over another U.S. military intervention, repeatedly assuring the public that this time would be different (D. Anderson 13). In 1991, after Operation Desert Storm, he famously declared, “By God, we’ve kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all!” (qtd. in D. Anderson 14). Bush’s public discourse equated the “Vietnam syndrome” with weakness, inscribing Vietnam as a symbol of conflict, pain, and loss that sapped at American confidence at home and abroad (Franklin 27). Indeed, even before the First Gulf War, President Bush encouraged Americans to forget the war that had divided them, urging the same kind of reconciliation that the transitional government in Chile was promoting (ibid).³² A “successful” military intervention in the Middle East was taken to prove America’s regained strength.

In an appendix to *The Perfect War* titled “The Warrior’s Knowledge,” Gibson offers a Foucauldian analysis of societal responses to narratives by veterans whose narratives expose the chaos and immorality of the war. Power structures discount veterans’ narratives, Gibson argues,

³² The Chilean transition to democracy occurred simultaneously with America’s build-up to the First Gulf War. Chileans voted Pinochet out of office in the plebiscite 1988, and in 1990 Patricio Aylwin began his term as Chile’s first democratically elected president since Salvador Allende. In March 1991, the same month Bush claimed America had “kicked the Vietnam syndrome,” the Rettig Commission released its report (Stern 84). Readers may also find it instructive to note that the United States government supported Pinochet before and after his coup: “For many, Pinochet was also the icon of U.S. government (or Nixon-Kissinger) complicity with evil in the name of anti-Communism.” (xxvii).

because such veterans possess a brand of what Michel Foucault calls “subjugated knowledge,” which Foucault defines as “a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to the task or insufficiently elaborated” (qtd. in Gibson 462-3). According to Gibson, policy-makers and scholars look to “the high-level command positions of the political and military bureaucracies as the *legitimate* sites of knowledge” (464). Conversely, men who actually fought in Vietnam are thought to possess “local and limited” knowledge with little bearing on the overall historiography of the war (465). Veterans’ narratives are further discounted because of their style; in place of the official language and dry prose forms favored by military commanders and politicians, they tend to present their narratives using informal language, including obscenity, in often-creative prose and poetry forms (467). Gibson also criticizes the tendency to assume that fictionalized accounts of the war are less truthful than nonfictional ones: “insofar as novels describe events as the consequences of structural patterns... the “fictional” claims to knowledge deserve as much consideration as do the “nonfictional” assertions” (472). Gibson thus advocates the inclusion of fictional texts, such as the work of Tim O’Brien (whose novel *Going After Cacciato* he cites), in the national narrative around the Vietnam War.

The Vietnam veteran, like the *colaboradora*, finds himself marginalized, speaking a truth that contradicts the dominant national narrative, hoping to convince the mainstream population that his truth is more valid than the official discourse allows. Tim O’Brien’s work contradicts the dominant narrative of the 1980’s and beyond by calling into question both the feasibility and the advisability of “kicking the Vietnam syndrome.” In *The Things They Carried*, O’Brien invites readers into the world of American soldiers before, during, and after the Vietnam War, vividly describing not only the traumas the soldiers experienced, but the ways in which the rest of the

nation was and is implicated in those traumas, indicating the need to incorporate veterans' lessons and perspectives more fully into the national narrative around Vietnam.

Though *The Things They Carried* was published with the subtitle, "a work of fiction," O'Brien insists throughout the text on its truthfulness. I will limit my engagement with O'Brien's complicated relationship with fiction and truth to examining how that relationship shapes his intervention in the national narrative around the Vietnam War, which is my primary concern. Moving forward, however, the reader should be aware of a confusing aspect of O'Brien's book: the fictional narrator and sometime protagonist is named Tim O'Brien. This O'Brien has much in common with the author Tim O'Brien: combat veterans from the same year and area of Vietnam, born and raised in Minnesota, both writers. They are not, however, the same person. Unless I specify otherwise, when I refer to "Tim O'Brien" during my textual analysis, I mean the narrator-character of *The Things They Carried*.³³

The structure and content of *The Things They Carried* display typical symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and exemplify trauma narrative, according to many critics. In his book *A Trauma Artist: Tim O'Brien and the Fiction of Vietnam*, Mark Heberle characterizes the author Tim O'Brien not as a Vietnam War writer, but as a trauma writer, maintaining that O'Brien intentionally "mimics" signs of PTSD in his writing (Heberle xviii). Caruth explains that PTSD is generally understood as "the direct imposition of on the mind of the unavoidable reality of horrific events, the taking over of the mind, psychically and neurobiologically, by an event that it cannot control" (Caruth 58). O'Brien's descriptions of how he remembers the war,

³³ For detailed discussions of truth and fiction in *The Things They Carried*, see: Marilyn Wesley, "Truth and Fiction in Tim O'Brien's *If I Die in a Combat Zone* and *The Things They Carried*"; Don Ringnalda, "Tim O'Brien's Understood Confusion," chapter five in *Fighting and Writing the Vietnam War*; and Mark Heberle, "True War Stories," chapter six in *A Trauma Artist*. Ringnalda and Heberle grapple specifically with Tim O'Brien's overlapping authorial and fictional identity in *The Things They Carried*.

or rather, relives it, fit this definition well. In the story “Spin” he writes, “The bad stuff never stops happening: it lives in its own dimension, replaying itself over and over” (O’Brien 32).³⁴ As per Caruth’s definition of PTSD, O’Brien’s mind cannot control “the bad stuff,” which he finds impossible to escape. Within the text, O’Brien invites the reader into his own traumatized mental space, where events replay themselves, by describing the same events repeatedly – in particular, the death of his friend Kiowa and the death of a young Vietnamese soldier. That these deaths affected him so deeply indicates that the national narrative of putting the conflict in the past is simply not feasible. Traumatic experiences, by their very nature, refuse to stay in the past.

Tim O’Brien’s traumas are not merely his own. Throughout the text, the narrator insists on the complicity of his fellow Americans in the traumatic experiences of combat soldiers in Vietnam. Mark Heberle offers an illustration of this narrative of complicity when he points out that in the title story, “The Things They Carried,” the soldiers metaphorically carry the values, industry and landscapes of their homeland (Heberle xxi). O’Brien connects the supplies the soldiers carry around Vietnam to their place of origin in a mocking ode to American industry and agriculture: “[I]t was the great American war chest – the fruits of science, the smokestacks, the canneries, the arsenals at Hartford, the Minnesota forests, the machine shops, the vast fields of corn and wheat – they carried like freight trains” (O’Brien 16). The war channels all the riches of America’s fruited plains toward a decidedly unromantic end: their loads reduce the soldiers to freight trains.

Early in the text, then, O’Brien primes the reader to recognize the national scale of the conflict in Vietnam. In later stories, such as “On the Rainy River,” he further explicates the

³⁴ *The Things They Carried* is divided into separately titled stories, some of which O’Brien had already published elsewhere. Though the stories together paint a picture of the Vietnam War and its aftermath, they do not quite attain (or aspire to) novel form. Calling the stories “chapters” would therefore be misleading.

relationship between the millions of individual Americans who allow American resources to flow into an unjust war and the thousands of soldiers who consequently fight and die overseas. “On the Rainy River” explores the social context that implicates other Americans in O’Brien’s trauma, contradicting the dominant national narrative’s claim that Americans bore no responsibility for the suffering the Vietnam War caused. By returning to his roots in small-town Minnesota, O’Brien reveals that combat soldiers grew out of the heart of mainstream American culture. Like the things they carry, they are the fruit of their nation, which accordingly must take responsibility for their actions and their sufferings.

We see Tim as a twenty-one-year-old fresh out of college, at home with his parents for the summer before starting graduate school at Harvard. The draft notice comes as an ugly shock, calling him to serve in a war he considers wrong. With dreadful specificity, he describes the likely reaction from his neighbors if he were to dodge the draft: “My hometown was a conservative little spot on the prairie, and it was easy to imagine people sitting around a table down at the old Gobbler Café on Main Street, coffee cups poised, the conversation slowly zeroing in on the young O’Brien kid, how the damned sissy had taken off for Canada” (45). Intimately familiar with the values of his hometown, Tim trusts the accuracy of his prediction, and it makes him angry. As his rage against the people around him grows, so does his sense of victimhood: “I held them responsible. By God, yes I *did*. All of them - I held them personally and individually responsible - the polyestered Kiwanis boys, the merchants and farmers, the pious churchgoers...” (ibid). The list of all-American figures continues. In Tim’s opinion, these people do not understand the war, yet they require him to fight and perhaps die in it. Torn between his anti-war conscience and the expectations of the town where he grew up, he finally takes off for the Canadian border. Once there, however, he cannot bring himself to cross. He

imagines his family, friends, teachers and neighbors cheering him on from the American side of the border, and makes his decision: “I would go to the war – I would kill and maybe die – because I was embarrassed not to” (59). This deeply personal sense of shame has roots in the war-ready social context that Anderson describes, where children of O’Brien’s generation “breathed the purified air of America’s noble self-image” as they grew up, and the United States’ moral superiority to other nations was clear (Anderson 14). Even before fighting, O’Brien questions this narrative of superiority, which paved the way for Americans to shrug off responsibility for the Vietnam War – something O’Brien will not allow them to do.

In her essay, “Truth and Fiction in Tim O’Brien’s *If I Die in a Combat Zone* and *The Things They Carried*,” Marilyn Wesley suggests: “[F]or O’Brien the war in Vietnam is the exaggeration of his nation’s basic principles” (Wesley 9). Wesley refers specifically to the dehumanizing aspects of war, experienced in boot camp in another of O’Brien’s works, but her analysis can be extended to the narrative of national superiority outlined above (indeed, the two are intertwined, as my discussion of “The Man I Killed” will show). While on the river, O’Brien compares the imaginary crowd on the shore to spectators at “some weird sporting event,” cheering for him to go to war, linking a wholesome pastime featuring cheerleaders and a marching band with the wildly different milieu of war (O’Brien 58). Feeling tremendous social pressure, he decides not to dodge the draft. “On the Rainy River” evokes the feelings of at least one young man on the eve of war, convinced that everyone he knows wants him to fight. Just as the bleachers at a sporting event are full of fans convinced of their team’s superiority and right to win, O’Brien’s hometown is full of people convinced of America’s virtue, and the bravery of young men who become soldiers. O’Brien thus nudges readers towards recognizing their own possible complicity in promoting values that encourage young men to go to war.

O'Brien does not point fingers directly at his readers. Instead, he focuses on bringing them into his personal experience of moral failure. O'Brien takes ultimate responsibility for his actions, closing the story with these words: "I survived, but it's not a happy ending. I was a coward. I went to the war" (60). Bravery, for O'Brien, would have meant listening to his conscience and crossing the river to Canada, rather than obeying the government and social pressures. Damning himself even more, he claims that the crowds he imagined on the riverbanks included a young man he would later kill in Vietnam (59). Even knowing that he would one day be expected to kill that young man, he chose to fight. Every action that follows, every pain he feels and inflicts as a soldier, thus stems from his inability to cross the Canadian border. He attempts to convey the anguish of his choice to his readers, describing his feelings as he sits on a boat in the river, deciding whether or not to jump overboard and swim:

Even now, as I write this, I can still feel that tightness. And I want you to feel it – the wind coming off the river, the waves, the silence, the wooded frontier. You're at the bow of a boat on the Rainy River. You're twenty-one years old, you're scared, and there's a hard squeezing pressure in your chest.

What would you do? (56)

O'Brien demands that his readers empathize, imagine themselves in his position. At this moment, he is only beginning to experience the dramatic rupture of personal myth that sets trauma survivors apart from non-survivors, making communication between them difficult. Most readers should find it easier to imagine themselves twenty-one years old and scared than as soldiers fighting in Vietnam. Entreating his readers to empathize with intense manifestations of the fairly common emotions of fear and social pressure, he lays the narrative groundwork to later ask for more difficult identifications.

This story opens a vein of anguish about O'Brien's cowardice and responsibility, which, though expressed as his individual domain, could also be extrapolated to apply to his social

context. Wesley interprets “On the Rainy River” as disrupting the myth that battlefield experiences rob soldiers of their innocence, since O’Brien seems to have lost his innocence while still in Minnesota, in the moment he chose to go to war (Wesley 9). Although it may be extreme to declare that soldiers come home from a war no less guilty than they were when they left for it – O’Brien’s narrative, in fact, suggests the opposite – I agree with Wesley that the moment of decision represents a certain primary loss of innocence, and assumption of guilt. Yet the decision to fight the Vietnam War was made on a national scale, not just by Tim O’Brien. Politicians and military officers made decisions that resulted directly in O’Brien’s deployment, and as we have just seen, entire towns in America’s heartland created an environment that discouraged conscientious objection. All of these social actors decided, in their own way, that O’Brien should go to war. They too, then, forfeited their innocence. The dominant national narrative, which absolves them of responsibility for the violence of the Vietnam War, falls apart under O’Brien’s subtly devastating critique.

O’Brien’s guilt and trauma from having committed violent acts in the Vietnam War manifest themselves strongly in his obsession with a particular Viet Cong soldier that he may or may not have killed. Though he invokes this figure several times early in the text, including as a member of the crowd he imagines on the banks of the Rainy River, his first major exploration of the scene of the killing comes in the story titled “The Man I Killed.” He begins with a description of the man’s ravaged face: “His jaw was in his throat, his upper lip and teeth were gone, his one eye was shut, his other eye was a star-shaped hole...” (O’Brien 124).³⁵ Throughout the story, O’Brien returns to these images of the man’s face, invoking the “star-shaped hole” four more times (counting one other variation of the phrase), indicating the indelibility of the image in

³⁵ The description continues for twelve lines on the printed page, a detailed run-on sentence that moves from face, to hair, to hands. O’Brien repeats parts of it verbatim over the course of the chapter.

his experience and his memory. As he contemplates the face and dead body on the path before him, he imagines the life the young man might have lived. The biography he constructs for the “slim, dead, almost dainty young man” recalls the scholarly young Tim O’Brien that we met in “On the Rainy River”: “He was not a fighter... He liked books. He wanted someday to be a teacher of mathematics” (125). Rather than imagining the dead man as an enemy, whose death should be celebrated, O’Brien can only see himself reflected back, another young man who would rather be in school than at war.

By acknowledging, indeed, fixating on, the humanity and essential innocence of his slain “enemy,” O’Brien subverts the dominant national narrative’s assertion that the Americans are fighting a “noble cause” war, and the insidiously attendant assumption that the Vietnamese are less human, less worthy of survival than the American soldiers. For example, Gibson describes the extremely dehumanizing rhetoric of basic training, which taught soldiers to follow the “Mere Gook Rule”: “If it’s dead and it’s Vietnamese, it’s VC” (Gibson 182). Though *The Things They Carried* does not include any stories about basic training, its effects are visible in characters who joke about dead Vietnamese and struggle to differentiate between friends and enemies. With a detailed biography of his victim, O’Brien vehemently rejects the dehumanization of the Vietnamese, and its partner narrative of American superiority.

The story of the “slim, dead, almost dainty young man” features centrally in O’Brien’s effort to communicate his experiences to non-veterans and the post-war generation, breaking through the selective amnesia the dominant national narrative encourages. In the next story, “Ambush,” his young daughter asks whether he killed anyone in the war. O’Brien tells her no, but he thinks of the young man. The story retells the incident of the man’s death, with more exposition and different details. Ultimately, it turns out that the incident may never have

occurred at all. In the story “Good Form,” O’Brien takes the narration a step back, outside the mode that characterizes most of the rest of the novel, and reveals that most of the stories in the book never happened.³⁶ One of the fictional elements is the story of the young man he killed. O’Brien thus “outs” himself as a writer of fiction, a mode of discourse that, as Gibson tells us, is often excluded from the national narrative. Explaining why he chooses fiction, he illuminates not only this short story, but his entire narrative project:

I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth.

Here is the happening-truth. I was once a soldier. There were many bodies, real bodies with real faces, but I was young then and I was afraid to look. And now, twenty years later, I’m left with faceless responsibility and faceless grief.

Here is the story-truth. He was a slim, dead, almost dainty young man of about twenty. He lay in the center of a red clay trail near the village of My Khe. His jaw was in his throat. His one eye was shut, the other eye was a star-shaped hole. I killed him.

What stories can do, I guess, is make things present. (179-80, emphasis added)

O’Brien tells us that he invented the story of the young man in part for himself, to give a face to his responsibility and grief. He cannot understand his experiences, let alone narrate them, cannot mourn the losses he inflicted and sustained, without telling this story.

Just as importantly, the American public needs to see the Vietnamese people who died in the Vietnam War, and the people who killed them. O’Brien delivers this passage with palpable urgency, echoing his plea in “On the Rainy River”: “I want you to feel what I felt.” He first called on his readers to empathize with a Minnesota college boy overwhelmed by the pressure to risk his life for someone else’s agenda. Now he makes an even more difficult demand, asking them to empathize with a traumatized war veteran with blood-stained hands. The traditional

³⁶ The narrator in this chapter may be a narrative layer closer to the author Tim O’Brien, but it is still dangerous to assume that they are one and the same. Don Ringnalda, for example, conflates them, assuming that the narrator in this story is the author Tim O’Brien (Ringnalda 107). Given that the entire book is labeled “a work of fiction,” and that O’Brien’s method relies – as Ringnalda recognizes and eloquently explains – on the blurring of truth and fiction, I hesitate to declare that *any* narrative voice in the text is the author’s, unmediated. Moreover, even if it were, this would not enhance its claim to truth, as per O’Brien’s own poetics.

narrative of the American soldier, and nation, as a “champion of good,” no longer holds. A victim and a perpetrator, innocent and guilty: his experience encompassed both, and both, he insists, must inform his readers’ understanding of Vietnam.

What effect does an entire year of violence, inflicted and suffered, have on an American combat soldier? “The Ghost Soldiers” offers one disquieting answer to this question. Critics have paid little attention to this story, which does not mesh well with the largely sympathetic portrayals of O’Brien that otherwise fill the pages of *The Things They Carried*. In this story, the book’s third-to-last, Tim O’Brien exposes the effects of the war on his psyche, revealing an obscene capacity for malevolence that contradicts the dominant national narrative of the nobility of the war, foregrounding instead its intense destructive potential on a human scale. After suffering two injuries, he has been removed from Alpha Company and posted to a supply station to finish his tour. Not only does his latest wound cause him constant pain, its location on his buttock leads to unkind jokes which add to his misery and resentment. When Alpha Company arrives for a few days of rest, he concocts an ugly revenge scheme to terrorize Bobby Jorgenson, the medic who nearly let him die in the field: during Jorgenson’s shift on the night watch, O’Brien will generate eerie noises, then set off flares and grenades, all to make Jorgenson worry that he is about to be under attack. In this story, O’Brien is vindictive and petty. As his former buddies find it more and more difficult to face him, his own self-loathing grows, but it does not stop him from carrying out the plan, with the help of Azar, an unlikeable member of Alpha Company.

Readers, too, find it more difficult to face him, as evidenced not only by my own sense that the story introduces a nasty version of O’Brien, but by the lack of critical attention it has received. Mark Heberle cites the story as an example of the character of Tim O’Brien being

separate from the real-life person, the author Tim O'Brien, who apparently never carried out the actions represented in the story. Heberle seems relieved to place the incident in the "fiction" column of O'Brien's work and say no more about it: "The vengeful behavior of Tim O'Brien in "The Ghost Soldiers" represents some of his creator's darker impulses, but the episode never occurred" (Heberle 185). To avoid dealing with the implications of the story, fictional or not, is to miss the point of the author's technique of mixing fact and fiction to create "story-truth." "The Ghost Soldiers" presents an unpalatable, but important aspect of Tim O'Brien's (the character's) Vietnam experience.

Tormented by physical, emotional and psychological pain, O'Brien abandons any pretense of nobility, deliberately inflicting on a fellow soldier the kind of mindless terror that Vietnam has caused him. Not only does he not fight the forces of evil, as the dominant national narrative claims he should, he aligns himself with those very forces, revealing again the illegitimacy of the myth of American moral superiority. Even after Jorgenson sincerely apologizes and O'Brien's former friends entreat him to let the medic off the hook, O'Brien cannot let go of his need for revenge. Vietnam has changed him: "For all my education, all my fine liberal values, I now felt a deep coldness inside me, something dark and beyond reason. It's a hard thing to admit, even to myself, but I was capable of evil. I wanted to hurt Bobby Jorgenson the way he'd hurt me" (O'Brien 200). Though once he could feel compassion even for the enemy, abhorring his own violence against the Vietnamese soldier, his experiences have twisted his mind so much, he now finds himself "capable of evil" against a fellow American he does not even hate. As he carries out the first stage of his plan to make Jorgenson feel the fear of death that O'Brien felt as he lay wounded and in shock, O'Brien loses himself completely and chillingly in the evil he so recently found within himself:

I was down there with him, inside him. I was part of the night. I was the land itself – everything, everywhere – the fireflies and paddies, the moon, the midnight rustlings, the cool phosphorescent shimmer of evil – I was atrocity – I was jungle fire, jungle drums – I was the blind stare in the eyes of all those poor, dead dumbfuck ex-pals of mine – all the pale young corpses, Lee Strunk and Kiowa and Curt Lemon – I was the beast on their lips – I was Nam – the horror, the war. (209)³⁷

By this point in the text, the reader has accompanied O'Brien and his fellow soldiers in their pain and loss, and knows how deeply O'Brien felt the deaths of "those poor, dead, dumbfuck ex-pals." For him to identify with the forces that caused them all so much misery represents a serious internal compromise, a loss of moral grounding. Here he makes no explicit appeal to the reader to feel what he felt, perhaps in recognition that this experience is truly beyond their comprehension. He confronts readers with the obscenity, both literal and figurative, of his Vietnam experience, an obscenity which Gibson cites as a defining aspect of the "warrior's knowledge," with its own claim to truth.

This moment of embodying atrocity does not last long. Soon thereafter, O'Brien decides the revenge scheme has gone on long enough. His cohort Azar, however, insists on finishing the job. At the end of the adventure, Azar gazes at O'Brien "with a mixture of contempt and pity," insults him a few times, and kicks him in the head before leaving (216). Jorgenson himself tends the minor injury, and the two men have an awkward but sincere moment of reconciliation. Now that O'Brien's evil moment has passed, and the two men have apologized to each other, the reader may be tempted to forget the incident, but that would be a mistake.

This tale of revenge and descent into evil exemplifies the kind of true war story that O'Brien explicates in the central story-essay of *The Things They Carried*, "How to Tell a True

³⁷ This passage resonates with Francis Ford Coppola's acclaimed 1979 film, *Apocalypse Now*. Phrases like "jungle drums" and "the horror" evoke images of the sinister jungle kingdom where Kurtz reigned with perverse authority. Detached from American military goals, Kurtz nonetheless embodied the experience the war had manufactured for him and other soldiers. This invites a comparison with O'Brien, who, though operating outside his orders and outside the moral code of his fellow soldiers, is nonetheless embodying "Nam" as he terrorizes Jorgenson.

War Story.” Like “Good Form,” it purports to reveal some of the author’s narrative tricks, the ways in which he plays with facts and fiction to create the “story-truth” he conveys to his readers. “You can tell a true war story if it embarrasses you,” he explains. “If you don’t care for obscenity, you don’t care for the truth; if you don’t care for the truth, watch how you vote. Send guys to war, they come home talking dirty” (69). This reference to voting ranks among the most accusatory moments of the entire book, reminding readers of the direct links between their political action or inaction and the traumas that turn innocent Minnesota boys into hardened men who talk about their “dumbfuck ex-pals.” Don Ringnalda makes a similar point when he declares that America cannot achieve “public maturity” until it “process[es] the messiness of war” (Ringnalda 91).³⁸ Ringnalda sees O’Brien’s texts as resisting the sanitizing tendency of mainstream culture, which Gibson also deplors. “The Ghost Soldiers” is an especially poignant example of this resistance because in it, the author turns against his own alter-ego character, revealing a Tim O’Brien whose repugnant actions are difficult to reconcile with the sensitive young draftee we feel we have come to know. By O’Brien’s own credo, the story’s obscenity speaks to its truthfulness.

Conclusion

La vida doble and *The Things They Carried* address us, and each other, from two distant corners of the world that experienced the violent effects of the geopolitical power struggle known as the Cold War. Their responses to the violence, and to the dominant forces attempting to tame that violence into an acceptable component of a national narrative, share a passionate

³⁸ Ringnalda cites as evidence the PG dubbing of the film *Good Morning, Vietnam* on television, where “fucking” becomes “freaking” – in a story about censorship, no less (Ringnalda 92). He thus supports Gibson and O’Brien in their emphasis on the role of obscenity in war narratives.

humanism, and an insistence on nation-wide recognition of moral responsibility. O'Brien makes little reference to nations besides the United States and Vietnam, but Fontaine's Lorena does not hesitate to expound on the connections between the conflict in Chile and events around the world. Lorena tells her interviewer, and by extension her readers, not to relegate her story to the long-ago and far-away, drawing parallels that specifically implicate Americans:

When I read about the prisoners at Guantanamo, detained for months and months without justice or due process, when I see on television the photos of the tortured people in Abu Ghraib prison, in Iraq, I think I know what's going on, I think I recognize patterns and procedures. *Déjà vu*. What they did to us in a lost alley called Chile had been done before by the Yankees in Vietnam, and the soldiers in Brazil, in Uruguay. Afterwards, they'd repeat it in Argentina, in Peru. Now it's the Iraqis' turn... the mujahedeen know it. (Fontaine 129, ellipsis in original)³⁹

Citing global examples of atrocities like those committed during Pinochet's dictatorship, Lorena underscores the urgency of her narrative project. The story of her life plays like a broken record, not only in her mind, but around the world, as the horrific human rights violations continue on a loop. Lorena tells her story in an effort to make us recognize that we, too, are responsible for the violence of our nations – we, too, are collaborators.

As Fontaine and O'Brien well understand, we are reluctant to take responsibility for actions that we did not ourselves commit, traumas we did not ourselves experience. Some Chileans still argue that Pinochet's dictatorship benefited the country on the whole, that reports of torture are exaggerated and whatever did occur is regrettable, but ultimately inconsequential. In the United States, our leaders have similarly exhorted us to forget the pain of the Vietnam War, rewriting it as a lost but noble cause. Narratives of American soldiers committing atrocities

³⁹ “Cuando leo de los prisioneros de Guantanamo, detenidos meses y meses sin juicio ni debido proceso, cuando veo en la televisión las fotos de los torturados en la prisión de Abu Ghraib, en Irak, yo creo saber de que se trata, yo creo reconocer patrones y procedimientos. *Déjà vu*. Lo que nos hicieron en ese callejón perdido que se llama Chile, lo habían hecho antes los yanquis en Vietnam, y los milicos en Brasil, en Uruguay. Después, lo repetirían en la Argentina, en el Perú. Ahora le toca a los iraquíes... Los muyahidin lo saben.”

are considered outliers, tangential to the national narrative of the war – one need only consider that just one person involved in the My Lai massacre was convicted of any crime (D. Anderson 4). Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush told Americans to forget, to move on, to kick the Vietnam syndrome. In Chile, the transitional coalition government, abetted occasionally by the Catholic Church, urged reconciliation and cooperation, so that the nation could enter the twenty-first century economically and politically strong. Wounds healed, these two nations could move forward.

Tim O'Brien and Arturo Fontaine tell us that the wounds never heal. Both of their protagonists speak in the voices of tortured souls on the margins of the national narrative, desperate to be heard and understood even as they recognize the experiential gap that separates them from non-survivors. With explicit and implicit appeals for our empathy, they strive to close that gap. We might want to walk away from the sites of their protagonists' traumas, but they grab us by the shoulders and forcibly turn us around, showing us our complicity in the violence they suffered and conflicted, and the lasting effects of that violence on individuals and nations.

Although we may be tempted to think that Fontaine and O'Brien forfeit their place in the national narrative by choosing to write fiction, both of their texts maintain a claim to truth that demands our attention. Asked about the consequences of fictionalizing narratives of collaboration, Michael Lazzara offers the helpful concept of fiction as historical play: "Sometimes reality is too crude or too difficult to confront. It doesn't permit much movement other than simply to shock us. Fiction, because of its *playful* nature, allows us to consider, to react, to question, to work through the past in different ways than pure reportage" (Lazzara "Re: Echoes"). This echoes Lorena's worry that her experiences were too crude for her daughter, so that she remained silent for decades – until a novelist came calling. In *The Things They Carried*,

O'Brien contends that the freedom fiction gives him to rewrite Vietnam allows the production of "story-truth." Although both authors arguably play with history, their texts argue for the enhanced rather than detracted truth value of their fictions, playfulness included.

The "real" Tim O'Brien, the Vietnam War veteran who wrote the book whose narrator shares his name, is ultimately inextricable from his work. His fiction is deeply personal, yet its distance from his actual experiences gives it as much power as its grounding in them. Based in part on his week's worth of memories from Vietnam Vietnam, the work of fiction represents also the reflections of an older, wiser Tim O'Brien who sees the good, the bad and the ugly in the soldiers he knew, the soldier he was, and the soldiers he writes. The interventions of time and fictionalization may have distanced this work from the "happening-truth," but he passionately argues for its adherence to the "story-truth."

Meanwhile, Arturo Fontaine claims truth and relevance for his narrative not on the merits of his own experiences, but through his research and his empathy. Nobody could call Fontaine a victim of Pinochet's dictatorship. His father edited a major Chilean newspaper from 1978-82, then served as Pinochet's ambassador to Argentina from 1984-7, collaborating with the dictatorship first through media silence and then through active government service ("Falleció").⁴⁰ Today the younger Fontaine is the director of the Centro de Estudios Públicos, which *La vida doble* reviewer Ricardo Leiva calls "the most influential think-tank of the Chilean right,"⁴¹ under the right-wing administration of Sebastian Piñera, but also serves on the board of

⁴⁰ The obituary I cite of Arturo Fontaine, Sr., ran in *El Mercurio*, the newspaper of which he was editor. It describes his career and calls him a "distinguished lawyer" ("distinguido abogado"). The characterization of Fontaine, Sr. as a collaborator is my own; indeed, I would venture to suggest that in this obituary, *El Mercurio* collaborates with the narrative of reconciliation, rather than recognize the human costs of the silence of the press during the dictatorship.

⁴¹ In fact, Leiva recognizes that Fontaine's background makes his choice of subject in *La vida doble* surprising: "Sometimes it is difficult to forget that this is not the story of a woman with a leftist background, but of a man who directs the most influential think-tank of the Chilean left." ("A ratos se hace difícil olvidar que éste no es el relato de

directors for the Museum of Memory and Human Rights in Santiago. In interviews, Fontaine tends to claim that he was drawn to the psychological aspect of collaboration rather than the political, but his novel paints a complex portrait of Lorena that fully embraces her political engagement and its context.⁴² Carlos Fuentes suggests the literary and cultural clout that Fontaine brings to the subject in an essay that is half review of *La vida doble*, half review of the state of the novel in Chile and elsewhere. Fuentes contends: “perhaps nobody represents better than Fontaine the transition of Chile’s social and political reality to its literary reality, and the tensions, conflicts, uncertainties, loyalties and betrayals of a society in flux.”⁴³ By devoting his first novel in twelve years to Lorena, Fontaine makes a strong political statement. As Lorena urges her interviewer to listen to her, to understand the complexity of her experiences, the reader knows that one person, at least, has heeded her: Arturo Fontaine. The interviewer never speaks, but the novel exists, and this is statement enough of the value of Lorena’s story.

What do these works ask of us besides our attention? In “How to Tell a True War Story,” O’Brien puts up a rare roadblock to interpretation: “In a true war story, if there’s a moral at all, it’s like the thread that makes the cloth. You can’t tease it out. You can’t extract the meaning without unraveling the deeper meaning. And in the end, really, there’s nothing much to say about a true war story, except maybe ‘Oh’” (77). “Oh” is better than spinning a narrative that excludes or justifies the excesses of a given political moment, be it the Vietnam War or the Chilean

una mujer con antepasados izquierdistas, sino que el del hombre que dirige el think-tank más influyente de la derecha chilena.”)

⁴² For example, a quotation in an interview of Fontaine published online in *Cine y medios* reads, “it’s more a psychological novel than a political one” (“es más una novela psicológica que política”). He expresses the same idea in slightly different words in his interview with *Revista Ñ*: “The psychological background attracted me more than the political theme” (“Más que el tema político, me atrajo el trasfondo psicológico”). These translations are my own.

⁴³ “acaso nadie, como Arturo Fontaine, representa mejor el tránsito de la realidad política y social de Chile a su realidad literaria, y a las tensiones, combates, incertidumbres, lealtades y traiciones de una sociedad en flujo.”

dictatorship. It is better than calling people heroes or villains when they are actually both. But “oh” is not the end of the story. If the writers have done their job, when we shut those books we know that there are wounds that are still bleeding, people that are still suffering. What is the purpose of seeing those wounds, if not to prevent the infliction of more?

To argue against the infliction of needless violence, to point out the dehumanizing tendencies of torture and warfare, is nothing new. The challenge is and always has been to make people listen to the argument, accept its relevance to them as individuals. Tim O’Brien and Arturo Fontaine take experiences and events that are wildly distant from the lives of most of their readers, and set themselves the creative challenge of making them comprehensible. Maybe Kalí Tal is right to say that non-survivors will never truly revise their personal myths, but this does not necessarily mean that a few people whose worldview has been changed by trauma can never affect a national narrative. For this to happen, writers must prove that these traumas affect their readers, not just because of a vague shared humanity, but because our actions, our votes, our judgments touch real people. In *La vida doble* and *The Things They Carried*, Fontaine and O’Brien meet this challenge with style and with passion.

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