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The Star-Spangled Banshee

Fear of the Unknown in *The Things They Carried*

McKay Hansen

The Vietnam War shook the American consciousness with its persistent, looming unknowns. President Lyndon B. Johnson even addressed such public anxieties over the conflict's uncertainties when he acknowledged before the nation that "questions about this difficult war . . . must trouble every really thoughtful person." Ever since the conflict, American literature has tackled these questions about the war's worrisome unknowns. Notably, Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* depicts a platoon of soldiers that meets the fear of the unknown head-on. O'Brien describes the soldiers' physical and moral surroundings as a fog in which "everything's all wet and swirly and tangled up and you can't see jack" (69). The men, not having anything definite to dread, experience a fear that only grows until it envelops anything and everything they might encounter. Giving a sense for such obscurity and terror at war, the narrator, Tim, recounts how a soldier faces that immense fear of the unknown when searching out a dark tunnel alone; even compared with the very real threat of being killed by an unseen enemy, he affirms that at least in some respects, "the waiting was worse than the tunnel. Imagination was a killer" (10). The novel challenges traditional explanations of fear as it explores many such confrontations with the unknown—indicating that even the return home after the turmoil of military service can cause disorienting alienation. O'Brien

depicts the tremendous fear of the unknown, that "killer imagination," as an emotional force somehow more powerful than anxiety about the worst conceivable combat experiences, like capture, injury, or death.

Since the text describes Vietnam as a place where "the very facts were shrouded in uncertainty" (38), a great deal of critical attention has gone toward understanding the unknowns of *The Things They Carried*, but the *fear* of the unknown has gone largely unaddressed. I argue that this leaves out an invaluable facet of understanding that the text offers about cultural interaction with the unknown. O'Brien's novel portrays the fear of the unknown as the psychological, social, and emotional struggle to reconcile gaps in one's preconceived ideas of reality with challenging truths in the surrounding world. But many who have written about the novel take for granted how, once exposed to the foreign, O'Brien's characters can conceive of ideological substitutes to what their communities teach them about other peoples. So although critics like Regula Fuchs and Michael Tavel Clarke have made significant steps toward detailing the battle of individuals against the "normative and formative . . . pressures, constraints, and obligations" imposed by society, their work remains incomplete (Fuchs 83). *The Things They Carried* illustrates how people can become so indoctrinated with inadequate ideologies that they undergo paralyzing fear upon encountering unknowns, never having grasped how to embrace or comprehend things outside of what they have always been told. I take Clarke's analysis of "the voices that are missing from the text" further, claiming that the portrayal of a silenced Vietnamese people in the text represents not only imperialistic censorship by the United States, but an actively constructed trope of foreign peoples with whom it is impossible to communicate, thereby also restraining Americans themselves to a confined sphere (139). I argue that *The Things They Carried* exposes fear of the unknown as a society-driven means of unifying people into a collective identity, one in direct opposition to outsiders, who are left forever indefinite.

Seeing a fear of the unknown in a new light necessarily calls into question the way communities teach—and what they neglect to teach—about what exists in the world beyond themselves, the Other. *The Things They Carried* suggests that the failures of American communities permitted soldiers to persist in their apprehension about "all the ambiguities of Vietnam, all the mysteries and unknowns," revealing

many communities to be structurally limited in their perspectives (15). A communal construction of fear has broad implications, for if a societal notion of fear discourages individuals from stepping outside arbitrary social bounds, guilt, conversely, results only from transgressing the same illogical conventions. In the text, guilt comes to suggest merely the emotional shaming imposed by a community for leaving what that community considers explained and knowable—and by implication, culturally important. I assert that these pressures do not manifest themselves solely on the scale of a small town or platoon like Tim's, but that fear and guilt bear sway on a national level as well. Devotion to one's place of origin is in many ways simple insecurity about the unknown Other, a distressed adherence to the comfort and security of the known. Tim's expression of immobilizing fear when trying to leave his homeland captures the text's portrayal of that cultural predisposition: "Run, I'd think. Then I'd think, Impossible" (42). In this way, *The Things They Carried* even undermines fundamental assumptions about patriotism, exposing how loyalty to a people and a country does not derive from any value inherent to a nation's ideals, but rather from a citizen's inability to conceive of escaping to any alternative.

In the novel, fear reaches beyond the preoccupation with impending misfortunes; it comes to encompass the feeling of ignorance in the face of new external realities. In fact, fear evidences the gaps in people's understanding about the world outside their own experience, arising, as Jason Wirtz describes, when an individual has left the familiar and "passed into the territory of the unknown and chaotic" (240). Tim experiences such fear of a chaotic unknown when he contemplates fleeing to Canada to avoid the draft: all he can picture about his journey is reaching the limit of what is described and prescribed by his culture. He can imagine "getting chased by the Border Patrol—helicopters and searchlights and barking dogs," but cannot conceive of any kind of life once he steps onto foreign soil (48). He fears what he does not know or comprehend; Tim's miniscule understanding about a world outside his own experience is representative of the widespread myopia of his community, even his country. A focused, local awareness limits inhabitants' consciousness to "the town, the whole universe" (57). When community members lack a reliable notion of existence beyond their own prior experience,

the strange and the unexplained become disturbingly incompatible with the familiar. Feeling repulsion toward the unknown results naturally from affirming an incomplete worldview.

A fear of the unknown grows into an unnaturally powerful force as soldiers, upon encountering the unfamiliar and foreign, attribute much of what they fail to understand to larger-than-life horrors, supernatural phenomena like "cobwebs and ghosts" (10). Relying on inevitably limited perspectives of reality, travelers like O'Brien's soldiers seldom find their prior understanding sufficient to comprehend every new experience; and their displacement, Tina Chen claims, "transforms everything in its scope" (96). Unequipped to handle the newness, they ascribe their atypical experiences to myths and legends. Such myths are their communities' primary narratives about what exists outside reality, stories which help them maintain a semblance of familiarity amidst the unknown. Giving any explanation, however illogical, to the unknown is preferable to remaining in a void where reason does not function. This response to the discomfort experienced as an entity abroad, as Elspeth Tilley describes it, exemplifies a tendency to "populate the spaces beyond [one's] immediate knowledge with mythical presences and imbue them with qualities of fear and menace" (33). Even things that might seem innocent back home, like noises in the night, become "this strange gook music," taking on frightening elements of the racial, the cultural, and the surreal (69). And so the men of O'Brien's platoon swear that there in Vietnam, "the land was haunted. We were fighting forces that did not obey the laws of twentieth-century science" (192). By endowing the land itself with dread and with the inexplicably mystical, these men in a distant land show how superstitious imaginings arise from the cultural Other. With all its "spirits" and "boogiemen," the fear of the unknown takes on an unreal strength more troubling, even, than the physical concerns (like impending violence, miscommunication, illness, and other literal ailments) that travelers may actually face (192).

Since being in a strange place causes so many uncanny sensations for the platoon, *The Things They Carried* reveals that fear of the unknown is actually brought about largely by community shortcomings, the failings of domestic education to accurately teach about other societies. By endowing entire lands and peoples with paranormal, unnatural power, O'Brien's soldiers show that their cultural views of the Vietnamese are

tainted by dehumanizing misunderstandings, biases, and prejudices. In the text, Norman Bowker's experience "learning" about the outside world in a community college "seemed too abstract, too distant, with nothing real or tangible at stake" (149). Communities like Bowker's tend to emphasize only the disparities between cultures and leave unspoken much that might provide common ground. And it follows that community members easily form skewed, exaggerated images of other peoples as a result, in which most everything is alien—images established by highlighting only a few major points of difference, like language, race, and religion. In other words, communities allow their members to continue in their faulty notions of outside peoples, preserving the way they "did not know shit about shit, and did not care to know" (137). Without comprehending other cultures, any attempts to envision a world that includes them are necessarily inadequate and even well-meaning efforts can, as Clarke puts it, "involve appropriation, misrepresentation, distortion, and reduction, all of which can be forms of arrogance and ethnocentrism" (149). This flawed, incomplete cultural education means that soldiers, and foreigners more generally, rarely possess the necessary tools for intercultural discourse and mutual empathy; and without those tools, they are made uncomfortable by what they discover beyond themselves. Therefore the fear of the unknown, because it is derived from faulty social teachings, is a societal construct that embodies larger psychological struggles with questions of cultural difference.

Community as portrayed by *The Things They Carried* is thus purposefully shortsighted: it requires the unknown to define and perpetuate itself, to establish a clear contrast with the "knowns" it claims as reality. Even O'Brien's small group of soldiers relies on the assurance of certain truths and uses stories to cast their cultural counterparts, women, as inexplicable and mysterious foils to their concrete reality. For Jimmy, the rain blurs Martha with the fog (23); in Rat's tale, Mary Anne is "still somewhere out there in the dark," enveloped in the land's secrets (110). In both cases, women stand in for the unknown. The novel thus takes a pessimistic view of the groups people form, showing how they are united not by what they have in common, but by what they do not and cannot share with others outside their groups. People instinctively erect barriers to define what constitutes a member of a community—simultaneously specifying who and what must remain distanced and unexplained. Pitting

the desirable "known" against the fearsome unknown, Lori Newcomb contrasts the pull of "what is easily recognizable, definable, categorical, and morally absolute" with all that is unappealing about "what is nebulous, undefinable, ambiguous, and relative" (97). Newcomb's work shows how the platoon interacts with both the Vietnamese and those on the home front to distance the mysterious Other and maintain a defining group identity. By extension, any community persists only by masking the reasons a person might abandon it for another and subjecting external peer communities to generalized obscurity.

Since the novel's societal depictions of the Other remain incomplete by design, the unknown persists not out of benign ignorance, but out of active attempts at quieting and smothering foreign entities. In "The Man I Killed," O'Brien brutally silences a Vietnamese soldier by leaving "his jaw in his throat" before the solider has any opportunity to make known his own intentions or anything about the people he represents (124). Tim, in faltering efforts to speak for him, can do little more than project his own general experience as a soldier and a son onto the dead man. Tim's total inability to empathize reflects how the Vietnamese cultural voice is utterly unfamiliar to the American public. Tim's platoon even symbolically appropriates the good that locals achieve by giving them racialized American language; when the soldiers follow an elderly Vietnamese man through a minefield to safety, he only parrots and mimics the soldiers' bigoted words, robbing the stranger of his own voice, thought, and accomplishment (32). O'Brien's work is not isolated in addressing how America silenced the Vietnamese during the war; films and other literary pieces from the period allow similar insight into that method of maintaining the unknown's mysteries. In *The Iron Triangle*, a 1989 Vietnam War film, protagonist Captain Keene says, "I spoke Vietnamese, so I guess they thought I could communicate with the people. They were wrong." His sentiment makes the impossibility of communication with the Other more than a language barrier: it becomes a cultural wall erected between the warring peoples. A decade closer to the war, the popular 1979 film *Apocalypse Now* featured soldiers repeating the mantra "never get out of the boat." The prevailing American attitude about Vietnam therefore bars all contact with people native to other lands, betraying the foregone conclusion that any interaction with the unknown will end in failure.

Fear of the unknown therefore takes on even further nuance in O'Brien's fiction, where it is often employed as a manipulative tool that keeps community members within established social bounds. One of Tim's Vietnam buddies tells of his hopeless feeling that after the dissolution of the platoon, he will be unable to ever integrate into a community again. Bowker writes Tim, "There's no place to go. Not just in this lousy little town. In general. My life, I mean" (150). Bowker, with his ultimate election to die rather than to live on without fitting in to a meaningful community, demonstrates how the unknown acts as a force that pushes against people when they try leaving the security and comfort of the familiar. Yet community, with its simplistic portrayal of the world— however easy and comfortable that portrayal may seem—retains the potential fault of producing narrow-mindedness. Calling out that trend, Clarke claims that "powerful, familiar cultural narratives make it difficult for individuals to give original or countercultural meanings to experiences in their own lives" (133). Clarke submits that while communal pressures can help unify values under a single banner, they can also restrict the freedom to explore culturally unconventional ideologies. I posit that *The Things They Carried* therefore offers additional significance to Edward Said's concept of "Othering" as a reduction of foreign entities to crude tropes. The novel indicates that communities like Bowker's leave seemingly strategic gaps in their descriptions of other peoples in order to foster the fear of the unknown, thereby eliminating the possibility of an individual community member leaving the homeland to integrate with the Other. Societal taboos are therefore not attached as much to views of morality as they are to this view of the Other as powerful and menacing. Imagining external phenomena to be irreconcilable with their reality, community members resign themselves to societal input, which they see to be inevitable. And so the wearied Tim, too, finally gives in: "I understood that I would not do what I should do" (55). He follows the crowd to a war he personally opposes, deciding not out of a sense of good, but out of a compelling fear of losing what he knows. A subjective morality remains in force merely by withholding from its adherents the knowledge necessary to subsist outside of traditional communities.

If community standards in *The Things They Carried* consist primarily of fears and unknowns used to control, the guilt that arises from transgressing such societal norms becomes not the result of real

wrongdoing, but just another arbitrary mechanism of culture to retain its subjects. If a community's values and narratives are truly so self-exalting, then it is as subjective as Robin Silbergleid suggests, and "to be good is to do what one is told" (146). When O'Brien's characters feel guilt, then, it is often due to their "sins" against a restrictive, flawed society. Ascribing shame and guilt does not punish community members for trespassing boundaries between good and evil; it instead chastises entering and exploring territory traditionally left uncharted, since those at home fear how new discoveries might upset the delicate balance of the organization they have already become acquainted with. This reading of the text enables more comprehensive interpretation of key passages like Tim's account of his guilt, in which he tells readers, "I was ashamed of my conscience, ashamed to be doing the right thing" (49). That shame, now identified as a tool of societal influence, represents Tim's struggle against the machine—not a conflict between two of his own internal ideals. His battle is a microcosm of what John Schafer terms "the tension between collective concern and individual desire," a tension Schafer finds every bit as prevalent in contemporary Vietnamese literature (across "enemy" lines) as in the post-war United States (14). Tim's submission to expectation reveals how lapses in ethics can be at once "nobody's fault" and "everybody's": a community has no single entity to pin blame on, but each of its individual constituents shares the blame of subscribing to an imperfect system of morality (O'Brien 168).

While both fear and guilt operate in local community groups that range from townspeople in Minnesota to soldiers in Southeast Asia, they also bear sway on a national scale, refuting the conventional image of a nigh-infallible national identity. *The Things They Carried* alleges that the society of America at war crafts a very incomplete image of the world, subjecting its citizens, in their "blind, thoughtless, automatic acquiescence to it all," to fear and guilt of the Other in order to use them in protecting its interests (43). Presented with the unbalanced alternatives of killing for unclear causes or abandoning all they know, draftees, in John Wharton's words, find themselves hesitating between "personal and national images of an American self which simply cannot behave in an altogether ethical way" (4). Diehard national advocates turn against those who question the government's imperialistic military imperatives in "patriotic ridicule," endlessly labeling as cowards those unwilling to

give over their wills (O'Brien 57). The populace of the United States accordingly feels incapable of leaving the motherland, since integration into foreign cultures and countries is portrayed as shameful—in some ways, even impossible. So the truly brave and moral in the world of the novel, as Regula Fuchs contends, are those who "fight the values instilled by [their] cultural upbringing" and dare to challenge longstanding traditions that perpetuate injustices against people at home and abroad (80). O'Brien's work presents citizens with a blueprint of a nation's ideological and psychological inner workings, enabling them to resist the submission and oppression that fuel cyclical systems of compulsion and encouraging individuals to work beyond the failings of their nations.

Yet in the novel, smaller communities struggle to break from cultural precedent; instead they become united through shared nationalistic terror, forming xenophobic images of a nebulous enemy so intimidating it transcends the differences between them. Such a "join or die" mentality is evident in the soldiers, who, finding themselves in a platoon integrated by others they cannot understand, are forced to accept their fellow servicemen as a lesser evil—or else persist in an impossibly divisive state of cognitive dissonance. Dave Jensen, fearing retaliation from Lee Strunk after a fight, says that obsessing over the intentions of the Vietnamese and those of another soldier at once is "like fighting two different wars . . . No safe ground: enemies everywhere" (60). Having no sense for the motives, purposes, or objectives of an external entity instills fear. Accordingly, in order to focus fear on an entire foreign people as a foe, rather than on fellow citizens and the disparities between their communities and origins, a narrative of national unity arises. Thus, using what Richard Slotkin calls "a myth of national identity," soldiers hesitantly trust one another on the assumption that they share more similarities between platoon members than with strangers across national borders (470). O'Brien's platoon, for instance, initially rejects Bobby Jorgensen as an outsider, but the new medic soon begins to "fit in very nicely, all chumminess and group rapport" as he joins in efforts concentrated against the Viet Cong (193). And *The Things They Carried* suggests that the same process takes place on the scale of an entire country by uniting figures from history, family, and pop culture against Tim's desertion; however disparate and motley the group may seem, it succeeds in dissuading Tim from leaving his homeland and crossing the Rainy River. Slotkin expounds on the

national harmony shaped by juxtaposition to the Other, adding that "we need the supreme difference of an enemy to allow us to see our likeness as Americans" (494). For this reason, even initial hesitance about markedly unique group members, who seem not to fit in, soon necessarily dissipates in order to maintain the vision on the larger, more worrisome unknowns about the foe.

The Things They Carried demonstrates how when vital national narratives disintegrate, citizens grow disillusioned with their own ideologies because the very institutions that make up their societal structure become increasingly unknown. Since most of the soldiers in the novel drift from traditional American perspectives, like the answers of Christianity in dealing with the unknowns of death, they find themselves needing to invent new explanations for their surroundings, explanations that fit their reality better than the societal stories told them for so many years. Tim says that in reaching to find answers for such defining questions, he and the soldiers "had to make up [their] own. Often they were exaggerated, or blatant lies . . ." (226). Confronted by a gap in empirical evidence about a socially promoted "truth," one (like the existence of an afterlife) which their culture asks them to cross with a leap of faith, the soldiers struggle and search for other ways around the issue. O'Brien's soldiers enter a moral vacuum, a whirling chaos of conflicting ideals which Marilyn Wesley characterizes as "difficult to organize into a reassuring fiction . . ." (89). Their skepticism captures why the government struggled to convince the American people of the Vietnam War's causes and consequences. Ultimately, attempts to portray conflicts as something they are not proved futile, signaling a rise in wariness toward political leaders and confirming that war's effect "depends on collective fictive interpretations" (Wesley 91). When President Richard Nixon claimed before the nation in his 1969 speech on Vietnam, "Our greatness as a nation has been our capacity to do what had to be done when we knew our course was right," his words were ironically undermined by being presented at a time when the nation could not agree upon just what *was* right. Left to choose between cowardice and dissidence, civilians often simply comply with what the government proclaims to be right. Many soldiers go to war motivated not by the moral call of a draft, but by an administration

that drops bombs on those that do not comply with its expectations, for a faceless organization might just as easily turn against non-conformist civilians as attack dissimilar foreign enemies.

Challenging longstanding notions of the citizen's love of country, *The Things They Carried* ultimately unmasks patriotism to be merely a manifestation of insecurity about the unknown—a desperate, clinging allegiance to one's familiar reality. The American narrative portrayed in the text would require its people to diminish the complexities of world powers until they see just "red checkers and black checkers," ensuring that its representatives "knew where [they] stood" (31). But the novel's soldiers make the difficult discovery that their nation's ideals do not actually provide an infallible moral compass, and that while it may seem the easiest route, it is not always most ethical to do as Carl Horner describes and "succumb to national pride" (256). Exposed to the frightful new experiences of war, all confidence in a patriotic cause, and even the surety of justice itself, begins to collapse. Soldiers who grow embittered toward their supposedly "good" national interests are figures characteristic of Vietnam War literature as a genre. This common thread of exposing faults in biased homeland narratives runs across many literary pieces contemporary to *The Things They Carried*; Matthew Hill claims that such literature illustrates how a nation's "collective ideologies and mythologies make industrialized violence possible" (179). And *The Things They Carried* drives home forcefully that such mythological traditions not only enable international conflict, but perpetuate and aggravate it. O'Brien shows how as soldiers rely on their country's fallacious legends as their basis for understanding the foreign (and, by extension, the unknown generally), they maintain the demeaning oversimplification of ethnic tropes. Wanting the ease of envisioning a world with "rules," many citizens swallow inadequate national narratives while suppressing reservations about them. But while all the flags and fireworks may put on "a pretty good show," seeming to celebrate the values and enlightenment a nation embodies, such flashy displays of commitment to what is close to home often blind people to lies beyond them, shrouding all else in shadow and mystery (148). Patriotism does not champion the familiar—it betrays fear of the unfamiliar.

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