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No-Man's . . . or Women's-Land

*Ecological Power over Human Identity in
The Things They Carried*

Sam Jacob

Elements of Vietnam's ecology depicted in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, such as human interactions with nonhuman plant and animal life and excremental decomposition, erase the effects of gender and racial identities. Traditional perceptions of wartime ecologies hold these environments among the most heavily decimated, damaged, and disfigured on earth, powerless against the full force of militarized humanity. Yet the opposite seems to occur in O'Brien's Vietnam. Mary Anne's excursions into the jungle trigger her transformation from a purely feminine civilian "with the complexion like strawberry ice cream" into a predatory and androgynously-gendered member of Vietnam's ecosystem (89). Rather than remaining a naïve and powerless female adolescent, the environment integrates Mary Anne as "a part of the land . . . wearing her culottes, pink sweater, and a necklace of human tongues" (110). Excrement has a similarly complicating effect upon racial identities for characters like Kiowa, the only character in the novel identified primarily through his ethnicity as a Native American. Kiowa sinks to his death in a shit field whose "filth seemed to erase identities, transforming the men into identical copies of a single soldier" (156).

Observing how a land burdened by the destruction of a human war dominates these human forms of identity raises interesting questions regarding the level of control that humans have over their own identity.

Critical discourse investigating landscapes and the environment in *The Things They Carried* primarily employs anthropocentric analyses, construing these spaces as mere symbolic topographies of terror and exile. For example, Tina Chen characterizes Vietnam as an “imaginative landscape . . . a fictive geography” that perpetuates soldiers’ psychological sense of exile from home (81). Chen attributes the landscape’s nonphysical influence upon the alienation of a soldier as the source for the rupturing of reality within O’Brien’s storytelling, a common conceptual destination of many of *The Things They Carried*’s critics. Other scholars have feminized the land, placing personified assignments of gender upon the nonhuman landscape. Brian Jarvis interprets the novel’s environment as a “gynecological geography” wherein the “vampyress” earth is engaged in combat with the soldiers (291-292). Brian Mangrum, though also feminizing the land, contradicts Jarvis by casting the land as a victim against the misogyny of “soldiers [who] find pleasure in feminizing . . . [and] violating the feminine” landscape. Race has also been symbolically adjoined to the land as a critique of the racial melancholy that permeated the Vietnam war. Both Jarvis and Jen Dunningway describe Kiowa’s racial presence in the novel as “haunted” or “haunting,” referencing Native American dances and rituals of worship towards the land (Jarvis 294; Dunningway 116). They ultimately assert that race’s minimal and spectral presence reiterates the melancholy of non-white racial identity. However, these analyses of racial and gender identity collectively ignore ecology’s literal and biological influence upon human identity.

Though all of these critics are concerned with the interplay between the land and social constructs like gender and race, I avoid purely human-centric interpretations of wartime landscapes in order to interrogate the nature and mutability of these constructs within an actual ecology rather than within a figurative or imagined landscape. I accomplish this by relying on more current theories of ecocriticism such as ecological agency and multispecies theory. I argue that the power to shape human identity is held by the more-than-human ecology of war rather than by humans alone. Traditionally disadvantaged social constructs, such as non-white race and femininity, as well as traditionally advantageous social labels of white and male, disappear within a war landscape not through symbolic or figurative

means but through biological processes. These processes include excremental decomposition and interactions with nonhuman lifeforms like animals and plants. The erasure of these human *social* identities enables the creation of new, *ecological* identities that provide the freedom which the purely human forms restricted. The ecological revision of these human forms of identity within *The Things They Carried* ultimately environmentalizes one of the novel's primary concepts, the nature of a soldier, transforming a soldier from a human representative of a military to an ambiguously-human lifeform within war's unexpectedly harmonious and interdependent ecosystem.

O'Brien first re-renders the conventional perception of a wartime environment from a space dominated by human interactions and interests to an inclusive and harmonious ecology. This ecology is a conglomerate of humans, plants, animals, and nonliving substances such as excrement and mud. Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George Handley have observed that too often social and political factors which help inform and construct identity are errantly defined and re-defined "without some engagement with the more-than-human-world" (25). Their proposition of inherently connected biological, political, and social ecologies could be considered unrealistic or unachievable within wartime ecologies, spaces that are often overrun by human militarization. Yet O'Brien himself indicates the connectivity of human and nonhuman life amidst the destruction of war, observing that even "after a firefight, there is always the immense pleasure of aliveness . . . The grass, the soil—everything. All around you things are purely living, and you among them" (77). The collective "pleasure of aliveness" shared between human, plant, and nonliving ecological entities forms what Jane Bennet terms an "agency of assemblage," or a distribution of power and influence among human and nonhuman forces (21). This inclusivity of wartime environments strongly contradicts conventional views of the detrimental ecological impacts of war. Despite being motivated by purely human interests, war elicits greater activity from other nonhuman ecological agents, resulting in the merging of human and nonhuman entities. This interpretation of O'Brien's ecology in *The Things They Carried* shows us that warfare can no longer be viewed in an exclusively human framework; rather, as Donna Bennet says, "Species of all kinds, living and not, are consequent on a subject- and object-shaping dance of encounters" (4). More-than-human members of war's ecology inevitably enact their own influence upon the human endeavors of war.

In these inclusive wartime environments, the power to shape human identity lies in ecological agents and processes rather than in exclusively human constructions. Previously powerful forms of human identity, such as race or gender, are minimized by the nonhuman ecology. This is because the interdependency between human and nonhuman entities does not guarantee the maintenance of these exclusively human-identities. Bennett points out that many of these social constructs are built upon “historical norms and repetitions,” and that nonhuman action and influences weaken these constructs’ “susceptibility to human . . . control” (26). Bennett’s idea especially applies in a wartime ecology. In any ecology, biological conformity, or a lifeform’s instinct to adapt in order to achieve homeostasis, changes according to the dominant ecological agent, which generally tends to be humans. Human biological conformity, as neurological biologists T.J. Morgan and K. Laland explain, is “characterized by an extreme dependence on culturally transmitted information” (1). However, war’s ecology separates the human inhabitants of the environment from those norms and repetitions on which they normally depend. Humanity’s resultantly weak control over their own identity affirms ecofeminist Ynestra King’s assertion that “there is no natural hierarchy; human hierarchy is projected onto nature and then used to justify social domination” (qtd. in Gaard and Murphey 3). The supposed naturalness of humanity’s control over their own identities is lost within an inclusive war ecology. Thus, a wartime environment’s control the formation of human identity is confirmed both in theoretical discourse and through biological science. By understanding wartime landscapes as spaces composed of the assembled agencies of all human and nonhuman forces, O’Brien exposes forms of human identity, such as race and gender, to manipulation and erasure by nonhuman ecological agents.

O’Brien androgenizes gender identities through influence of nonhuman lifeforms and animals, granting multispecies relationalities greater power over gender than social standards. Within this new habitat of inclusive agency between human and nonhuman lifeforms, ecological relationalities replace humanity’s transient gender roles, male and female. For Mary Anne, this transforms her from an unadulterated-by-war adolescent into a top-of-the-food-chain predator. Mary Anne’s metamorphosis has been generally viewed by scholars as a simple transition from feminine to masculine. However, the impact of this transformation upon the conceptual understanding of gender is more debated amongst literary critics. Lorrie Smith decries Mary Anne’s

portrayal as a “more masculine . . . hence monstrous and unnatural” character, indicting this as evidence of the text’s misogynist subconsciousness (32). Chris Vanderwees counters Smith, claiming that Mary Anne’s change indicates the “uncertainty and ambiguity contained in . . . gender” (276). Building off of Vanderwees’ observation, I attribute this androgenized construction of gender to Mary Anne’s interactions with multiple animal or nonhuman species within the ecology of Vietnam. Mary Anne becomes neither more feminine, nor more masculine, but joins “the zoo, as “one more animal” in the jungles of Vietnam (102). Interestingly, this zoo includes the Green Berets, who adopt Mary Anne into their “den,” casting both Mary Anne, a formerly quintessential female, and the Green Berets, the most masculine of soldiers, as genderless animals (105). In this way, the gender identities of both Mary Anne and the Green Beret soldiers give way to an animalistic identity. This identity is based upon what multispecies theorist Thom Van Dooren calls “biocultural attachments,” or collective eco-identities based upon “dynamics of predator and prey, parasite and host, . . . symbiotic partner, or indifferent neighbor” rather than societal expectations for male-female identity or behavior (6, 3). A literal example of this sort of predator-prey interrelationship is the rotting leopard head which the soldiers have placed in their hut. This formerly dominant animal is described as carrying “the stink of the kill” (105). Though the novel does not offer explanation as to the source of the leopard head or its use within the hut, the head does seem to represent this group’s position at the top of Vietnam’s food chain. In this way, the environment is able to dismantle human constructions of gender identity and reorient human hierarchy based on ecological relationalities.

These new animalistic and ecological forms of identity provide freedom from historically and culturally limited gender roles. Women who participated in the Vietnam war generally did so as nurses or humanitarian volunteers. Often, these responsibilities were offered to women who came from oppressed circumstances. Lynda Van Devanter, a former nurse in Vietnam, explained how most of the nurses she worked with were “idealistic ‘good girls’ who grew up in Catholic homes . . . and had never been more than fifty miles away from their parents” (qtd. in Mythers 79). This certainly epitomizes Mary Anne as she arrives in her initial “somewhat lost” and naïve state (89). The opportunity to work as a nurse in the war appeared to offer many women freedom from these homely constraints. Many of the nursing advertisements, like one in the 1970 August issue of *Glamour*

magazine, attempted to present women in soldierly ways. For example, the advertisement features a woman dressed in the green soldier uniform, holding a lamp in the middle of a dark army tent (Vuic 136). This appealed to many women's desires to escape the limited roles afforded to them at home, such as former nurse, Pamela White. She explains how her choice to go to Vietnam was not driven by a feeling of victimization, but rather to have her womanhood "demythed" (qtd. in Mythers 82). However, society's misogynist view of women was also reinforced by these advertisements. While the photo represented a new soldierly woman, the ad itself reads, "You're needed, too, for your women's touch . . . your reassuring smile in the middle of a long night" (qtd. in Vuic 136). Rather than referencing actual nursing practices, the ad simply transplants the traditional homemaker and caretaker role of women into the jungles of the war. Women were persuaded to come to Vietnam in a contradictory fashion, ultimately leaving them to struggle against the same gender restrictions they hoped to escape in war. These cultural and historic complexities make Mary Anne's departure from her gender identity all the more significant. Her activities with the Green Berets and alone in the jungles provide a way for her to fully participate in the war. O'Brien describes how Mary Anne's new animal identity empowered her "to penetrate deeper into the mystery of herself," those elements of her innermost soul which the previous constraints of her gender had obscured (109). Though unsettling to those operating within the human-only realm, this animal identity enables an inclusive and empowering ecological existence. Through the integration of nonhuman species into war, more dominant ecological schemas of identity facilitate greater freedom than former gender constructs.

Race's control over human identity is also subverted by ecology, this time through the ecological process of excremental decomposition. This nullification of racial identity in Vietnam occurs despite the highly racialized context of this text's time period. Along with the Civil Rights movement, race was intertwined into many other major political and social movements, including the environmental preservation movement of the 1960s. A fascinating example of this is an environmental awareness poster produced by the Keep America Beautiful organization in 1965, featuring a Native American chieftain with the caption, "Pollution. It's a crying shame." Clearly playing off of stereotypes of Native Americans' religious connections to the land, these posters utilized race to fight against rising levels of pollution. Despite the racial context of this text's historical period, issues of racial

identity appear to, as Jen Dunnaway says, be “erased from O’Brien’s vision of the war” (115). However, the implications of this absence are disputed. Dunnaway effectively counters Lorrie Smith’s assertion that O’Brien’s silence concerning non-white race is an indication of his subconscious racism and instead claims that O’Brien’s ‘silent’ or minimal descriptions of race are purposefully pronounced in order to provide a spectral and “haunting” critique of the era’s overt “white-centrality” (116, 124). She asserts that race’s intentional absence is “a potent, even radical organizer of meaning” (113). However, the ecological process by which race is removed from O’Brien’s text counters Dunnaway’s assertion that racial identity operates or holds meaning within war. Kiowa, the novel’s sole racialized character, endures a graphic and disturbing death during a bombing in a shit field. In the scenes describing Kiowa’s death, the verbs ‘swallow’ and ‘suck’ appear several times with the field and the soldiers as the antecedent subjects. The “filth . . . mud, and water” are constantly “sucking things down, swallowing things,” and the soldiers themselves “tasted the shit” in their mouths and eyes, inadvertently ingesting the excrement (162, 143). Though these verbs appear to personify the nonliving matter, the filth’s swallowing and sucking of soldiers also indicate the actual ecological process of decomposition—the taking in and breaking down of dead or dying biotic matter. As Kiowa’s carcass is later pulled from the field, he is caked with a “bluish green mud,” obscuring his past identity as the non-white-skinned Native American (167). This biological process contradicts the aforementioned stereotypes regarding Native American attachments to the land employed in the environmental movements of the era. Even when ecology is culturally attached with race, ecology removes these attachments. The other soldiers, though escaping death, do not escape the excrement, which also “seemed to erase [their] identities” (156). Ultimately, racial constructions of human identity vanish within this wartime environment not in a purely narrative or symbolic fashion, but before our very eyes through excremental decomposition.

These natural processes and the resultant eco-identities reinvent the concept of a soldier as an ecological, even nonhuman, organism. The diminished power of social constructions of race and gender create space for ecology to control the central soldierly identity. Whether considering the animalized and androgynous Green Berets, or the excrement-colored soldiers of Kiowa’s unit, these ecological processes disambiguate O’Brien’s description of these soldiers as “identical copies of a single soldier . . .

interchangeable units of command" (156). This sameness of the soldiers is more than just a figurative descriptor of social or psychological conformity but is an indicator of literal biological conformity. In order for soldiers, both women and men, to soldier well in war, they give up an exclusively human existence and interact with the ecology around them. The assembled agencies of all the members of war's ecosystem—plants, animals, mud, filth, etc.—exercise what Jane Bennet terms "thing-power" or biologically "resistant force" against the human constructs, interests, and systems operating within war's environment (26). And in the ecology of *The Things They Carried*, the ecological agents and processes outnumber and outmatch the various social constructs that inform and shape human identity, thus subjecting O'Brien's human conception of 'soldier' to more-than-human alteration. Ultimately, ecological processes operating in O'Brien's text transform our conceptual understanding of soldiers from individually uniformed agents of a national military to uniformly identical lifeforms amidst all members of a richer, vibrant, and inclusive wartime environment. A soldier's identity is no longer solely determined within human constructs of gender or race—it is collectively recreated within the inclusive ecology of war.

The resultant power which wartime ecologies exert over human identity demand that we begin to reconsider the more-than-human battles and conflicts of war. As Handley and DeLoughrey have said, we must recognize that "biotic and political ecologies are materially and imaginatively intertwined" (13). O'Brien's text shows ecology to be more than just a lifeless victim of war's destruction. Nature is not merely the space upon which war is fought—it holds a vibrant power of its own. Amid the anthropocentric arenas of combat, plants, animals, and abiotic matter enact their power upon the co-inhabitant human species. War, those current and those to come, must continue to be understood as a more-than-human conflict. We must also accept that human identity is not fully controlled by humanity. Rather, it is constantly changed and amended by nonhuman ecological forces. The understanding granted through this eco-critical view of war and human identity opens doors for greater integration of nonhuman interests, lifeforms, and agencies into the realms of sociality, politics, and literature.

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