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# Female Representations in Contemporary Postmodern War Novels of Spain and the United States: Women as Tools of Modern Catharsis in the Works of Javier Cercas and Tim O'Brien

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FEMALE REPRESENTATIONS IN CONTEMPORARY POSTMODERN WAR  
NOVELS OF SPAIN AND THE UNITED STATES: WOMEN AS TOOLS OF  
MODERN CATHARSIS IN THE WORKS OF JAVIER CERCAS AND TIM O'BRIEN

by

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## ABSTRACT

In this thesis, the notion of women being used as tools of modern catharsis is explored through the comparative analysis of the Spanish novel *Soldiers of Salamis* (2001) by Javier Cercas, and the American novel *The Things They Carried* (1990) by Tim O'Brien. The two novels, separated by linguistic and national traditions, and personal choices by each author, will both be evaluated for their unique postmodern treatments of war, memory, and verisimilitude. Expanding from this base and through an application of feminist theory, the female representations—which are partly crafted by an unconscious masculine language—will be deconstructed for their intended and unintended rhetorical impact. Combined with an examination of the cinematic interpretations of the novels' salient characters, this application of feminist theory hopes to illuminate problematic representations of women created by authors whom also deliberately write novels which contain an egalitarian message of healing.

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## INTRODUCTION

In considering the manner in which war novels and the intimate relationship they form between reader and author, it is not easy to ignore the impact war has upon those who read and write about it. Readers form a bond with authors of war novels due to their ability to explain to us the seemingly inexplicable, authors tell readers a story about the past in order perform an exercise in catharsis. Thus, a war novel is a therapeutic event the author and the readers engage in communally. This totality of experience displays not only the evidence that contemporary war novelists my work examines are categorically anti-war in their vision, but that this vision comes from a place of egalitarianism. These texts, one could say, are texts of healing. When we finish a contemporary postmodern war novel, we must detest war, if we do not already; if we were already anti-war, as readers, then we glimpse at the unknowable—we perceive the difficulty of trauma and its companion, memory. Writing about war is, by its philosophical underpinnings, presented as a totality. That being said, articles in the press hint at an overriding issue that war-writing has thus far managed to escape, the continuing problem of misogyny in the war novel. In Kathleen Founds' December 2014 BuzzFeed cultural news article "When Your Favorite Writer Lets You Down," she poses the dilemma of appreciating another egalitarian-inspired war novelist, Kurt Vonnegut, because of an ingrained misogyny in his writing; she asks, "If Vonnegut could see through the myths about war, why couldn't he transcend myths about sexual violence," (Buzzfeed 2014). Founds goes on to challenge the humanity of Vonnegut's writing by indicting his treatment of rape

culture, which he unwittingly expresses (through his character Billy) as reparative to women in his 1968 story “Welcome to the Monkey House”; Founds says:

“Tellingly, Kurt Vonnegut never used the word “rape” in his story. I suspect he didn’t think of Billy as a rapist. I think rape culture is just so pervasive that Kurt Vonnegut didn’t recognize the myths he perpetuated. Fish ask, “What’s water?” Men—even moral geniuses—struggle to recognize rape culture. It makes me wonder: What is it I don’t see? How are my moral blind spots revealed in my writing? (Buzzfeed 2014)

Along with this, *Atlantic Monthly* contributor Noah Berlatsky warned in his January 2015 article, “The ‘Product of Its Time’ Defense: No Excuse for Sexism and Racism,” the idea that sexism or racism is “a product of its time” assumes that the past was self-evidently worse than the present, that culture progresses in some sort of straight-line fashion, and that we can therefore assume that folks now are smarter and more enlightened than folks in the past” (Berlatsky, “The ‘Product of Its Time’ Defense: No Excuse for Sexism and Racism”). These two concerns, that the war novel contains an unexamined misogyny and that it may alight itself from criticism via a thought-terminating cliché, are not simply problems for Vonnegut.

In my thesis, I will explore this phenomenon in two seemingly disparate canons, the Spanish and the American, alongside the language—their patriarchal codes—that two respective novelists, Javier Cercas and Tim O’Brien, use in their war novels which imply a problematic depiction of femininity within the greater Western tradition of war writing. Through the identification and analysis of instances of sexism in these authors’ works, my investigation sheds light on the way in which hyper-masculine tropes still sustain

contemporary war-writing, and how this leads authors, who I believe to be texts of healing in their intention, to misrepresent the feminine. The problem lies in the authors' masculine symbolic order; Berlatsky declares that, "dismissing the classics' shortcomings as just a reflection of the era's norms mischaracterizes history and undermines the books' very relevance" (Berlatsky, "The 'Product of Its Time' Defense: No Excuse for Sexism and Racism"). What follows is an examination of the deficiencies of a patriarchal-coded language within the Western tradition of the evolving war novel, especially its insistence upon using Woman as a tool for catharsis.

The key problem with these novels lies in the presentation of women—in the context of a war story—as stylistic elements of male catharsis. It must be clarified what exactly it means to invoke the Aristotelian catharsis. Instead of a mere purge of emotions through fear and pity, this modern sort of catharsis refers to the conscious attempt of these contemporary war novels to reconcile a traumatic past; catharsis is achieved through the recovery of traumatized memory—attempting to understand the trauma—and ultimately these novels provoke a catharsis in the reader. Like the Aristotelian model, the reader experiences pity as there is sympathy for the traumatized characters, and fear is present as combat is a marked element of the text; but ultimately there is a revelatory moment, an understanding that, in the end, what has transpired in the novel has led to a reparative experience. The reader should feel hope at the end of a war novel. The final thought is on the serene, not the belligerent. As far as the contemporary postmodern war novel is meant to be reparative, one of the key modes of repair occurs via women *as tools of catharsis*.



Their bodies, on display and in a various states of objectification, coupled with their maternal and/or *ingénue* qualities assist in the Aristotelian purgation of fear and pity. They exist along the perimeter of the male-oriented war trauma tale, and as flat as they are as characters, academia contends that in the contemporary war novel, they have become feminist icons in their subversion of blatant chauvinism marked by works which preceded postmodernism's reign over the genre. And yet, as the war violence and human degradation provoke the requisite pity and fear of catharsis, these women appear and perform functions for the author's end: they are sexual comfort when the protagonist is wearied by the conflict, they are mother when he needs gentle support or guidance, they can become daughters to justify his heroic prose which will finally end all war with a stroke of his pen, and lastly, they can turn into monsters, masculinized, and even neutered if need be. Huidobro once said that the poet is a small god, and certainly in the case of these patriarchal authors, and as woman is formed from Adam's rib, so can she serve as a useful rhetorical tool.

Cercas and O'Brien invite us to read stories where the female characters are loved by the male protagonists, but then these authors proceed to sideline the female role in the epiphany the protagonist discovers at the end. Both authors conclude their novels with notions of love for women. For instance, in *Soldiers of Salamis*, Cercas described his primary female character Conchi in a lovingly, "maternal" (206) manner. At the end of *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien created a fictional childhood girlfriend Linda, a girl he claimed to have "loved" (232) nonetheless. Regardless if they are loved by their authors, these female characters are flat. The human condition trumps the female experience in these texts, so of course woman as a character would be obscured, shuffled off the page,

or transformed into neutered ambiguity. We must remember that this neutered ambiguity—this all-inclusive humankind—is a humanist ideal, but ultimately a masculine notion, in the text. Mankind and its trauma are at the center stage of these texts, and while the blame for the horror will take shape as a self-flagellation, as one man is all man and is no man to postmodernists like Cercas and O’Brien, the female symbol is not regarded as important to exist unto herself, but a symbol to be created and then consumed by the patriarchal language of man’s sign system. To be sure, these authors do not hate women (although they may exhibit symptoms of misogyny), but they do use women as stylistic and rhetorical tools; tools to understand the pain of war, and to find comfort amidst the ruins. The postmodern contemporary war novelist had a mother, and yet his stories contain flat, motherly characters, not fully-formed mothers as characters. As the mother/lover/daughter figure serves to heal and guide the male protagonist of the war novel, so does woman in general serve to validate his experiences. War may harm all, but in the war novel, woman is an assistant to man as he struggles to examine the memory of the war; as we are to understand it, it he who will find the truth, not her. Ultimately, it is my hope to explore this question: is writing about war, its path of remembrance, an anti-feminist enterprise? How do cinematic representations of these texts affirm or complicate this problematic representation of women? Can contemporary war novels of the West, as texts of healing, retain their relevance if their language’s symbolic order is alienating to femininity?

## CHAPTER 1: POSTMODERN LABEL

In order to consider the problematic femininity apparent in the two texts being evaluated, *Soldiers of Salamis* by Javier Cercas and *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien, it is important to understand both texts in their unique expression, but also as they relate to one another on an aesthetic level. When they are classified as postmodern, it is most important to note each novels' use of metanarrative. Both use metanarrative to examine verisimilitude, but in the unique ways of their *national literatures*. According John Michael Jakaitis, this phenomenon in *American literature* straddles several linguistic traditions—Anglo-American, Spanish-American, and French. He states:

Most studies of American metafiction tend to subsume that movement within the larger category of a self reflexive narrative tradition beginning with Lawrence Sterne and fluidly developing through the modernist experimentation of Joyce, Woolf, and Faulkner to the more recent subversion of modernist possibilities in fictions by Borges, Robbe-Grillet, and John Barth. Typically, these studies also encounter the need to define contemporary metafiction as postmodern. As a result, metafiction becomes both the logical extension of a developing narrative tradition and definitive of the postmodern. (iii)

Going further back, *Spanish peninsular literature* has a metafiction that is patently *Quijotesque*; Philip Stevick notes this influence to have begun with Cervantes choosing to acknowledge fiction itself within a novel by writing himself and the authorial pen into

*Don Quijote*, thus preceding the Anglophone and Francophone examples which later engaged in self-reflexivity; he writes:

New fiction, more than any fiction since Cervantes, chooses self-consciously to depart from tradition without investing that departure with any particular urgency or without making that act of departure the starting point of the fiction at all, in the way that such departure virtually animates the fiction of Cervantes, Fielding, Jane Austen, Flaubert, Hemingway, and a hundred others. (62)

## CHAPTER 2: JAVIER CERCAS AND *SOLDIERS OF SALAMIS*: SPANISH VERISIMILITUDE

Selecting our Spanish metanarrative as the first to be examined, *Soldiers of Salamis* was first published in 2001 and follows the story of a fictionalized version of Javier Cercas himself who, with the help of his girlfriend Conchi, tracks down the man who saved the disgraced former leader of the Falange, Rafael Sánchez Mazas, from a firing squad in Catalonia during the Spanish Civil War. Told in the disjointed, metafictional fashion of the postmodern—an ambiguous text which deconstructs a master narrative—the novel makes a strong case for the subjectivity of a war story, and the problem of knowing the historical memory of the war when so much of what is remembered is guided by a subjective truth. The search for this unique sort of remembrance, this particular sort of truth, is conducted not by a soldier, but by a failed novelist and journalist. Going further, one could argue that the journalist operates as a detective in search of truth, and therefore falls within the realm of the extensive *novela de detective* genre (sometimes referred to as the *novela policiaca* or the *novela negra*), a genre that has become a standard in the Spanish transatlantic canon. How Cercas, as a fictional character, functions as a detective in this unraveling of the mystery surrounding the truth about Sánchez Mazas and his unknown savior (later revealed to be ex-Republican fighter and French legionnaire Miralles) would be difficult to comprehend if the plot is not evaluated. As stated before, the fictional Cercas is a down-and-out journalist, having failed as a novelist, and decides to undertake his former profession

again, in the wake of a failed marriage. In one respect, Cercas, the public memory detective, is chasing a solitary unknown—who spared a prominent member of the Falange—and yet he is chasing something hidden about Spanish literature itself that was obscured or lost in the aftermath of the war. He is not only chasing the secret of Sánchez Mazas, but also what was left unsaid (or unread) after the symbolic death of famed poet Antonio Machado, who was displaced in the final days of the war, across the border in France. Cercas explains in his article ‘An Essential Secret’:

Of all the stories in History,’ wrote Jaime Gil, ‘the saddest is no doubt Spain’s, /because it ends badly.’ Does it end badly? We’ll never know who that militiaman was who spared Sánchez Mazas’ life, nor what passed through his mind when he looked him in the eye; we’ll never know what José and Manuel Machado said to each other before the graves of their brother Antonio and their mother. I don’t know why, but sometimes I think, if we managed to unveil one of these parallel secrets, we might perhaps also touch on a much more essential secret. (12)

Following this notion of the relationship between the past, public memory, and personal memory amidst a situation of mystery, Sebastiaan Faber sees this search for an essential secret as reparative more on the national level than anything else. He states:

In *Soldados de Salamina*... Miralles’ life-saving act becomes the object of the narrator’s obsessive quest because he sees it as containing a “secreto esencial” (180), a key not only for understanding the war but for finally overcoming its divisions—something like a recipe for national reconciliation. This explains at least in part the book’s tremendous popularity. (150)

That being said, Minardi and Sanemeterio note the essential secret's importance in a more complicated sense of how multiple memories function:

It seems that *Soldados de Salamina* is structured on unveiling what is secret. On the other hand the main characters want to know who the soldier that spared Sánchez Mazas's life is and why he did so. On the other they want to know who they themselves are and what kind of writers they can be. From the perspective there is a double recovery of memory in both the novel and the film. The protagonists aim to reconstruct what Paloma Aguilar Fernández refers to as “social memory,” or personal memory, in contrast to historical memory, which allows for different interpretations. Both are processes of restoration. (64)

This double recovery of memory begins with Cercas, by an odd sort of fate, interviewing the son of “one of the founders of the Falange and a close personal friend of Jose Antonio Primo de Rivera.” (6) This man, Rafael Sánchez Mazas, and his story become an obsession for Cercas as he tracks down how this strange sort of event, this moment of mercy, occurred—if it actually did. Public memory and a very tricky sort of truth become salient early in the text, and it is this detective of that public memory who tasks himself with uncovering what exactly happened, so long ago. Interestingly, this investigation into the saving of someone, as opposed to the murder of someone, places *Soldiers of Salamis* at a unique confluence between the *novela de detective* genre, the Greek tragedy, and the truly postmodern novel, in that the tropes are present (to account for genre), and then inverted (*à la* postmodern) against a canvas of the cathartic. In W.H. Auden's “The Guilty Vicarage,” the type of detective story we read in *Soldiers of Salamis* can be

understood, if we keep in mind of the postmodern inversion of *murder and mercy*. Auden states:

The vulgar definition, “a Whodunit,” is correct.... In the detective story the audience does not know the truth at all; one of the actors-the murderer-does; and the detective, of his own free will, discovers and reveals what the murderer, of his own free will, tries to conceal...” (406)

The search is for the truth, indeed, but not for a murderer; in an ironic twist, Cercas’ novel concerns the search for someone who *chose not to commit murder*.

For the truly postmodern, the irony is that the decisive event, the murder, is not a murder; it is mercy. As for the question of a dialectic of innocence and guilt, as Auden puts it, it is a formidable one posed by *Soldiers of Salamis*, one which encompasses an entire nation and its grappling with a crisis of identity and culpability in the years following the demise of the Francoist regime. This crisis began *officially* with the Amnesty Law of 1977, which initiated the concept of problematic memory into the Spanish collective conscience. Ofelia Ferrán, in her book *Working Through Memory*, explains the historical context in which Cercas drew his inspiration. She states:

Indeed, with the Amnesty Law passed in 1977, believed to be necessary for a peaceful coexistence and reconciliation between political groups, many believed the transition effectively instituted a culture of amnesia in which the memory of the civil war and the Franco regime became effectively taboo. The Amnesty Law pardoned those who had been accused of political opposition to the Franco regime, but it likewise guaranteed that anyone who had been part of the regime



would not be held accountable for any past actions. Amnesty became amnesia, and the generalized consensus that emerged in the early transition seemed to fly in the face of the celebrated maxim by George Santayana claiming that those who do not remember the past are destined to repeat it. In Spain, quite the contrary the only agreement that all political forces seemed able to gather around at the time was that, in order not to repeat the past, it was best to forget it. (23)

This forgetting, of course, refers to the *Pacto de olvido* (the Pact of Forgetting), the provision with the law that whatever occurred during the Francoist period would be willfully forgotten in order to “move on”, so to speak; this was, in effect, a *double forgetting*, as citizens in the Francoist could not speak of a legitimate Republic that once was, but they were also barred from denouncing former Francoists per the *Pacto* of the new transitional democracy. Sadly, Spanish citizens were forced to be forget their real past not once, but twice. As far remembrance goes, the Francoist memory recalled a clear-cut victory against the red communist forces, the Spanish Catholic traditionalists defeating godless and foreign liberals. In fact, the war was murkier than a simple ideological battle—this was a civil war. The conflict pitted neighbors and communities against one another, and the moment of mercy is one that perfectly exhibits this problematic memory of what Spaniards did to each other (the summary executions perpetrated by both sides), and what humanity remained amidst all of this bloody chaos. Rafael Sánchez Ferlosio, the son of Sánchez Mazas, recalls his father’s experience to highlight this nuance:

My father always kept the trousers and sheepskin jacket he was wearing when they shot him, he showed them to me many times, they’re probably still around;

the trousers had holes in them, because the bullets only grazed him and he took advantage of the confusion of the moment to run and hide in the woods. From there, sheltering in a ditch, he heard the dogs barking and the shots and the soldiers' voices as they searched for him knowing they couldn't waste much time searching because Franco's troops were on their heels. At some point my father heard branches moving behind him; he turned and saw a militiaman looking at him. Then he heard a shout: "Is he there?" My father told how the soldier stared at him for a few seconds and then, without taking his off of him shouted, "There's nobody here!", turned and walked away. (6)

Apart from the mayhem, this moment of mercy is also very forgotten about; Cercas may wish to discover what happened in the past, but this moment of "*Por aqui no hay nadie!*" (18) ("There's nobody here!") also resonates with a desire—promoted by Francoist influence during the transition with its brand of historical revisionism—to forget. Paradoxically, a Republican pardons a Nationalist, in fiction, when Franco condemned so many Republicans to death, in reality. History of postwar Spain focuses on the legendarily brutal repression Franco directed at former Republican supporters and their families, and yet, the reader is asked to examine a story about Falangist escaping death. Coupled with this, the soldier's exclamation changes Sánchez Mazas' place in history; in doing so, the reader wonders if Sánchez Mazas actually survived, thereby mirroring the national act of forgetting.

The investigation into this moment of mercy between a Republican soldier, Miralles, and the one of the spiritual authors of the Falange reflects the desire of the author to craft a deliberate postmodern inversion of the memories available to the

Spanish public at the new millennium; those being the assumed binary of having either the Francoist memory or the Republican counter-memory as a way of knowing one's national past. Minardi and Sanemeterio explains this new vision of remembrance as "a chiasmus between the accounts of the so-called winners and losers." (65) Instead of choosing an exclusively Republican or Francoist memory, Cercas evaluates how the Spanish past is remembered *by both groups*, and just as importantly, how the past is forgotten. As a liberal writer, readers expect Cercas to remember through a Republican lens which pities the treatment of the Republicans who were defeated, and instead he inverts this, and remembers the treatment of a Falangist, who was on the side of the winners, and yet who was silenced by his own party. The binary of winners and losers is turned upside down.

This inversion, the ability of the author to get his reader to sympathize with the Falangist enemy (going on the assumption the reader is a liberal as well), should not seem as a surprise since other scholars have noted that Cercas seeks to complicate binary thinking through his body of work. Idoya Puig states:

Robert C. Spires has noted that in Cercas there is a process of depolarisation, of avoiding radical positions...: "For him depolarization leads to polymorphism, to more tolerance for conflicting approaches to these concepts, and ultimately to both individual and communal commitments to ethical behavior. (93)

This attention paid to the creation of a more ethical remembrance of the war does have its challenge, in that Cercas is crafting a war novel that may be less about the ideological aspect, and more about the *human experience* of war and war memory, and its subsequent literary representation. Faber states:

Early in the novel, the narrator transcribes an article he wrote for the newspaper about the Machado brothers and Sánchez-Mazas, in which he calls attention to the fact that Antonio and Manuel Machado, though intimate friends, ended up in opposite political camps simply because Manuel happened to be in Burgos when the Civil War broke out; Cercas insinuates that the same could have happened to Antonio. An indignant reader accuses him of “revisionism,” a charge that the narrator shrugs off. And yet, *Soldados de Salamina* has a revisionist flavor to it, less because it attempts to understand and explain the motivations of Falangism than because of the way it construes the relationship between literature, humanity, and politics. While the political ideals are shown to exert a tremendous force on human actions, they are always, in the end, seen as fundamentally extraneous and inferior to both art and life. (149)

These literary gymnastics which Cercas employs in order to alight *Soldiers of Salamis* from an ideological standpoint also points to his concerted effort to create a metanarrative, once again connecting the contemporary war novel to a postmodern aesthetic. Faber explains:

A novel about novel writing as much as about the war, one of *Soldados*' overarching themes is the idea that the dead live on as long as we continue telling and hearing their stories—even if those stories are more faithful to the conventions of plot and narrative than to historical reality. (148)

While dedicated to crafting a clear moral message, Cercas' novel remains ambiguous to what the reader should take away as the *real truth* concerning what happened between Miralles and Sánchez Mazas in that decisive moment of murder or mercy. The ambiguity

is given center stage when Cercas ultimately tracks down Miralles in a retirement home in Dijon, and attempts to extract the truth. Miralles and Cercas' final exchange perfectly illustrates the grayness against an exquisitely Spanish backdrop that has come to be associated with the contemporary war novel of the peninsular tradition:

There's one thing I didn't tell you,' I said to Miralles.

'Sánchez Mazas knew the soldier who spared him. One time he saw him dancing a paso doble in the gardens of Collell. Alone. The paso doble was "Sighing for Spain".' Miralles stepped off the kerb and came over to the taxi, leaning his big hand on the rolled-down window. I was sure I knew what the answer was going to be, because I didn't think Miralles could deny me the truth. Almost pleading, I asked him: 'It was you, wasn't it?'

After an instant's hesitation, Miralles smiled widely, affectionately, just showing his double row of worn-down teeth. His answer was:

'No.' (203)

The ambiguity of Cercas' work toward truth reveals that memory of the past is also coupled with an unclear, hopeful, and idealized view of the future for his little world, one which may serve as a microcosm for Cercas' hope for Spain's future. In the end, Cercas' dreams of possibilities. He dreams that, with Miralles and his friend, the famous Chilean postmodern author Roberto Bolaño, and his confidante and girlfriend, Conchi, would create an unorthodox family in order to finally end their collective orphan state. He dreams that his new family would honor Miralles at his funeral by playing *paso doble* records, and that Cercas, the liberal journalist, would find a quiet respite by playfully

dancing on his grave with the strict nun who cared for Miralles—all with the knowledge that a moment like that could be a secret. With the *paso doble* as a rich, culturally-evocative image (and an eternally-gendered symbol) as his aesthetic launching point, Cercas deconstructs the intimate moment in all its personal, Spanish, and ultimately human, idiosyncrasies; along these lines, Cercas reinvents the *paso doble* as a cipher, a way to think about the past when words fail:

Because words are only made for saying to each other, for saying the sayable, when the sayable is everything except what rules us or makes us live or matters or what we are or what that nun is and that journalist who is me dancing beside Miralles' grave as if their lives depended on that absurd dance or like someone asking for help for themselves and their family in a time of darkness. (207)

Arriving at the gray space between truth and the fictional, *Soldiers of Salamis* is a patchwork of perspectives, all of which consider the central question of the verisimilitude of war memory. In Idoia Puig's article "Verisimilitude, self-reflection and humanity," the kind of truth which Cercas searches for is of debatable veracity, at all times; in that sense; *Soldiers of Salamis* is most certainly connected to Cervantes and his novel *Don Quixote*, especially for its postmodern play with truth and storytelling. Puig evaluates this phenomenon:

Cercas admits that he lies and at the same time says he wants to write a true story... we are left with the uncertainty of who to trust. Cervantes chose an author, Cide Hamete Benegeli, who as an Arab in those days was renowned for not telling the truth, to recount the true story of Don Quijote... Is the conflict ever

resolved? ...Cervantes and Cercas are both engaged in the task of dissolving the boundaries of history and fiction. (86)

This kind of faulty remembrance may be less a literary parlor trick, and more about a kind of writing (about the past) which seeks to advance the case for personal memory as the most important of all forms of remembrance, even if that kind of writing fills the reader with doubt. After all, the title of novel, *Soldiers of Salamis*, carries with it the notion that the knowing the events at Collell, decades ago, is as “remote in time as the battle of Salamis.” (31) They are moments of war, and are lost in time. Puig opines:

Cercas leads the reader to believe that he had all the facts well documented, and yet he makes the reader realise that they are all based on a subjective account, on memory, which by nature is unreliable. He has brought different pieces of evidence to make the story credible, but then he destroys the effect of verisimilitude that he had achieved, leaving the reader unsure of what to believe as if to prove the difficulty of narrating a story. (84)

The instability inherent to the subjective memory of war, and the self-awareness displayed by this novel in its depiction of the enigma of this memory is ultimately what Cercas was driving at. In January 2013, Juan Gabriel Vásquez of *Brick* literary journal sat down with Cercas to discuss the author’s unique sort of postmodern storytelling of war memory. Commenting on *Soldiers of Salamis*, Cercas explained his vision:

There’s a question: why does a Republican soldier not kill a leader of the Falange? The whole novel is a search for that truth: who is that soldier and why does he do what he does? At the end of the novel, the answer is that there is no

answer. The answer is the question itself, the attempt to answer that question. It's an ambiguous, essentially ironic, mistaken question. (126-127)



### CHAPTER 3: TIM O'BRIEN AND *THE THINGS THEY CARRIED*: AMERICAN VERISIMILITUDE

Comparatively, *The Things They Carried* looks to find this truth, referred to as “story-truth,” by way of the experiences of the novelist, who examines the memory of war (in this case, the Vietnam War) not as a detective of public memory, but as a former combatant. In similar fashion, O’Brien’s novel is a meandering postmodern affair; it employs metafiction, the novelist O’Brien transforms into his alter ego Tim the narrator, and the structure, like that of Cercas, is fragmented as it considers how a war story should be told. The question of verisimilitude, indeed, lords over the text.

O’Brien’s novel, apart from exhibiting facets of the postmodern, is also a cultural touchstone for the tradition of the American war novel, and a canonical piece whose language is as accessible to its national readership as *Soldiers of Salamis* is to Spanish readers.

Evaluating the novel from its unique vision, one that is quintessentially O’Brien as much as it is salient to the broader American war novel tradition, is important to understanding its singular, as well as comparative, value. Susan Farrell explains how the novel functions as its own unique piece of storytelling:

Tim O’Brien’s novel follows Tim the narrator and various members of Alpha Company during a tour of duty in Vietnam, and their separate lives after. Wrought with powerful images of war and the toll it exacts upon the average infantryman,

it is a collection of vignettes which examine the confusing psychological interior of trauma; “[and] above all, *The Things They Carried* is a book about storytelling, a book that explores how the most devastating trauma can be transformed into something live and beautiful through art. (Farrell 271)

This attention paid to the process of storytelling and how it relates to the verisimilitude of war memory is strikingly clear from the onset of the novel. The title declares that the literary contents are “a work of fiction,” and that, his autobiography *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*, this is not a historical account of events. It is not a purely fictional experience like his first war novel, *Going After Cacciato*, in that the main character in this is named Tim O’Brien. So, which is it? Anyone who has ever read O’Brien knows he fought in Vietnam, and he dedicates this work of fiction to “the men of Alpha Company; and in particular to Jimmy Cross, Norman Bowker, Rat Kiley, Mitchell Sanders, Henry Dobbins, and Kiowa”; and yet, to question whether what occurs in the novel is *fact or fiction* may be the wrong move. Steven Kaplan discusses how this ambiguity functions in the novel. He states:

In *The Things They Carried* (1990), Tim O’Brien takes the act of trying to reveal and understand the uncertainties about the war by looking at it through the imagination perhaps a step further than he did in *Going After Cacciato*. In *The Things They Carried*, O’Brien destroys the line dividing fact and fiction, and tries to show even more so than in *Cacciato* that fiction (or the imagined world) can often be truer than fact. As in all of his other works, in *The Things They Carried* Tim O’Brien emphasizes the magical powers of storytelling. He also takes his

readers straight into the middle of the process through which facts and memory are transformed in fiction. (170-171)

Like Cercas, O'Brien plays his own game with verisimilitude in order to tell both a personal and national tale, and a sorrowful one at that; Vietnam was tragedy for the author—the novel at times reads like notes for a eulogy—and for those who lived through that chaotic period of time. Why is veracity important? Answering that question with a definitive *yes or no* then begs the terrible question: okay, so it happened, people suffered and died, *so what?* As callous as it may seem, readers may require more than fact-checking in order to mourn alongside an author. The binary of fact or fiction inevitably pushes a reader into a dark corner, one arrives at a dead end with the only choice but to create a thought-terminating cliché: *what's past is past. Move on.* It seems that O'Brien feels that this is insufficient, so he alights his writing from fact or fiction, and in doing so creates a whole new realm for discourse about war and memory and storytelling. Like Cercas, he starts with creating a fictional self. Farrell examines how this fictional self is a matter of genre, at least when considering other canonical American writers of the same period. She writes that Tim O'Brien is in company with other American authors like Norman Mailer and Philip Roth, who also enjoy creating a fictional alter ego. She adds:

Why do contemporary writers sometimes choose to name characters after themselves? One reason may be that such a move tends to blur the line separating reality and fiction. Skeptical about the objectivity of traditional history, postmodern writers understand that history dependent on narrative. Since we cannot recreate historical events except through the stories we tell about these

events, it stands to reason that experience, or at least the human ability to understand and communicate experience, is always mediated by language. (277)

Unmooring the text from its historical veracity allows for a flexibility in confronting the gray spaces of the war and the psychological impact of its carnage which were felt by O'Brien and soldiers like him, often and sometimes many years after the conflict ceased. Like Cercas' attempt to find a way toward reconciliation through the postmodern play with fact and fiction, it seems that O'Brien is concerned with a spiritual healing, perhaps redemptive but maybe just reparative, and a healing that one can only find through the creative process. Unable to answer the nothingness of death, O'Brien passes through it with his prose because a true war story does not abide by set fact, set truth, or a clear moral; he wonders about the nature of a war story, how it reflects our failure and loss *and* our hope and rehabilitation. He cares not if it is factual. In that sense, O'Brien's writing tends toward the ethereal at times. In a chapter entitled "Salvation, Storytelling, and Pilgrimage" of his book *Soldiers Once and Still: Ernest Hemingway, James Salter, and Tim O'Brien*, literary critic and Gulf War veteran Alex Vernon examines the search for healing in O'Brien's prose, with special attention paid to the cryptic notion set forth by the author that "we kept the dead alive with stories." Vernon states, "I do not mean to suggest that O'Brien or Tim actually hopes to resurrect the dead or save lives destroyed by the war. The text's language of saving lives works metaphorically," (226) and it should be understood that by keeping the dead alive, the act of storytelling is not just an act of healing, but one of commemoration. Oblivion, it would seem, is the terrifying alternative for an author who cares so deeply about his dead friends; basically, O'Brien can save them from oblivion by honoring their memory in prose form.

Finding this renewal is not easy in the stark reality of having friends die. His platoon mates perished in seemingly meaningless ways in a war of dubious value. His childhood girlfriend Linda died of cancer. In order to seek this renewal, O'Brien employs a supernaturalism in his writing, and as a conjurer, he can magically raise the dead.

Vernon explains:

*The Things They Carried* assigns [a] shamanistic role to Tim the narrator, who has preserved his childhood sweetheart Linda "in the spell of memory and imagination" in the same way he has preserved the soldiers he knew who died in Vietnam—and in the same way O'Brien writes, and for the same reasons: to happen onto epiphany or understanding or enlightenment; to transcend the ordinary and the actual, to work miracles, to find spiritual relief. Thus the actual Chip becomes the novel's Curt Lemon, whose death Tim reinvents for his own peace of mind... In the "The Lives of the Dead," Timmy, while dreaming, talks to the dead Linda, and in this same spirit of dreaming he reanimates his dead buddies. My point is that to read *The Things They Carried* as journey or pilgrimage, we must read it not as a war story but as a postwar story, the story of the writer at his desk, not the soldier in the jungle, his childhood wand a pencil now, on an entirely different kind of journey. (227-228)

From the vantage point of his desk, and like Cercas, O'Brien can magically rearrange the cold, dead facts of the past, with inventive prose, in order to achieve a proper catharsis.

Both authors seem on a journey with their characters, as they go to the place where memory first forms, to the place of trauma. The woods at Collell and the Lemon Tree are sites of traumatic memory, so the authors must use magic to detach these moments from

the irretrievable past; through invention, by manipulating the truth, they can journey from a point of trauma to a point of healing, from painful memories to moments of catharsis.

Given that it appears that O'Brien wished to create a healing effect through his writing, it is important to ask the more obvious question: *what happened over there?* Unlike Cercas and his examination of mercy over murder, where Sánchez Mazas is spared and then the deaths of thousands of Spaniards are implied but not necessarily viewed (basically, it is about a bloody civil war, and yet is a very bloodless novel), O'Brien pointedly, and in graphic rendering, examines the carnage of the war he is writing about. This disturbing aspect of the war novel is one that shows that, in order for healing to take place, suffering must occur. This suffering is an intimate experience for the reader. Farrell sees this phenomenon of atrocity as a matter of genre. She states:

O'Brien shares much in common with other American writers of Vietnam War literature who must grapple with a question underlying much of the literature of the later 20<sup>th</sup> century: How does one write about atrocity? As Kurt Vonnegut puts it in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, a World War II novel actually written and published during the Vietnam War: "There is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre." That's why his book is so "short and jumbled and jangled," Vonnegut explains to his editor. Similarly, Vietnam War writers often use forms that may at first appear confusing, fragmented, or disordered to readers. (280-281)

With the suffering assured, and the text's postmodern language unmoored from the pointless debate of fact or fiction, O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* becomes, like Cercas' *Soldiers of Salamis*, a text of healing in that it mines the depths of the author and the reader for the unknowable answer to how one should remember a war, and tells its

respective stories. It acknowledges loss, not only of friends and fellow countrymen, but of meaning in the face of a personal and national tragedy, and it seeks solace in the therapeutic effect of boundless storytelling.

#### CHAPTER 4: TREATMENT OF FEMININITY AND MASCULINITY IN THE WORKS OF CERCAS AND O'BRIEN

Albeit from disparate national communities confronting truly different wars (Spain's, a civil conflict, and Vietnam, a colonialist/Cold War struggle), both novels, when read alongside each another, speak to the reader in similar ways. Storytelling and the nature of truth become the salient features of each work, and both focus as much on the author as they do on the main characters; or, rather, the main characters sometimes are the authors. Inspired and sensitive, haunted and hyperaware of the material they are writing, Cercas and O'Brien craft war novels that work as emblematic examples of the codes of postmodern fiction, and which devote themselves to how a war and memory interact. And yet, along the periphery, while reading these texts, we are confronted by the pressing issue that is *almost* drowned out by the anguish and loss of the war storytelling, namely the juxtaposition of the ultimately prosaic nature of the gender politics of the works (which masquerade as feminist at times) versus their visionary approach to war and memory.

Although both authors display a determined ability to evaluate the complicated nature of humanity, their thinking is still trapped by an overriding Western *logos* which places on the male-oriented thinking a privileged vantage point above others—even if this viewpoint claims to be egalitarian. That is to say, these authors show their postmodernist ability to subvert old misogyny, and yet fall short of being labeled feminist authors as they do not conform to a way of writing that represents the feminine properly;



according to Magali Cornier Michael, in her book *Feminism and the Postmodern Impulse*, notes a necessary aperture for scholarship which evaluates this interaction between feminist theory and the postmodern. She states:

The primary area of intersection between feminist and postmodern critical practices, in fact, lies in their common aim to question, expose, and subvert Western male-centered tradition, culture, and thought, an agenda that begins by challenging the concepts central to upholding Western thought and male dominance... Of interest to contemporary feminism are the strategies by which postmodern theories and aesthetics question and subvert the artificial system of binary hierarchical oppositions that grounds and reinforces both Western thought and male dominance. Indeed, the masculine bias inherent in this system of oppositions demonstrates the degree to which binary thought is male-centered. Each set of oppositions has a dominant term associated with man, authority, and privilege and a subordinate term associated with woman: man and woman, male and female, masculine and feminine, subject and object, self and other, sanity and madness, reason and irrationality, active and passive, presence and absence, truth and falsehood, fact and fiction. (32-33)

To be clear, the representations of women in these two novels reflect an egalitarian impulse toward a more charitable portrait, yet they fail because of the symbolic system which Cercas and O'Brien unconsciously adhere to. As much as they might wish to be egalitarian in their visions, their male-oriented, patriarchal languages are deficient. Both authors wish to reveal a new way of remembering loss, to remember wars which harmed their communities, and this delicate, very anti-war approach is ultimately about one thing:

ingrained catharsis in the text. Their stories subtly overflow with emotion, as they describe unique national tragedies. In order to initiate this process of catharsis is one troubling aspect of the war novel, one which is normally overlooked because the themes of war and memory, those loud issues, wash out any consideration of gender. One might expect this is because these authors feel war and memory are more important themes of their works than feminist considerations, but we will explore authorial intentions later on.

The female body and the cathartic process are designed uniquely in *Soldiers of Salamis* and *The Things They Carried*. That being said, let us begin with what, in my opinion, is the more imperceptible example between the two: the presence of Conchi as Javier Cercas (the detective of public memory) uncovers the “truth” surrounding the (failed) execution of Rafael Sánchez Mazas. But who is Conchi? Remembering that this is a story about a man attempting to discover a truth about war, it is important to highlight the connection Minardi and Sanemeterio make between *Soldiers of Salamis* and storytelling; they state, “It is possible to analyze how memories and ‘truth’ are constructed in a way that also assigns identity. Walter Benjamin argues that power groups construct history.” (65) Beyond Francoism creating a narrative of the past, Cercas creates *his* version of events in the patchwork of various remembrances of the war. As a woman, Conchi is not telling this history, she is not the decider of “truth.” Simply put, storytelling, recording history, whatever label one wishes to describe memory of war, is decidedly a male enterprise in *Soldiers of Salamis*, regardless of ideological orientation. If this was another example of purely masculine writing of the past, then *Soldiers of Salamis* would be a simple update of the kind of war writing that modernists like Hemingway pioneered. The easy counterpoint to this assertion—that memory of war is

male-dominated—is that men traditionally have fought wars, and women have not. The question becomes, then, why even include a woman in the storytelling, even if she exists on the periphery of Western thought, war novelizing, and tortured remembrances? This, however, is the great trick that war writing pulls off, and it is a trick that it plays even on itself. For being such a hyperaware genre (many scholars liken Cercas' novel to that of a metanarrative), it also appears to not know itself when it comes to women. Cercas' novel begins with a lesser examined male archetype, but one which is incredibly important to the war novel: the boozy, sometimes chain-smoking, introspective writer who is haunted by war (a war which he may or may not have fought it) and is in need of comfort and guidance. He needs this comfort in order to recover the past. Some might say this characterization is cynical, or perhaps even disrespectful towards such a serious venture as war storytelling, and yet, Cercas and O'Brien seek catharsis from a point which intersects with flat female characterization. Cercas writes:

Her name was Conchi and her only job I knew of was that of a fortune-teller on the local television station; her stage name was Jasmine. Conchi intimidated me a little, but I suspect I've always liked women who intimidate me a little, and obviously I made sure no acquaintance would surprise me with her—not so much because I was embarrassed to be seen dating a well-known fortune-teller, as for her rather flashy appearance (bleached blond hair, leather mini-skirt, tight tops and spike heels); and also because, why lie, Conchi was a little bit special... [She] loved the idea of dating a journalist (an intellectual, she'd say), and although I'm sure she never read a single one of my articles (or only the odd very short one), she always pretended to read them and in the place of honour in her living room,

flanking an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe raised on a pedestal, she had a copy of each of my books exquisitely sheathed in clear plastic. (33)

The first real instance of femininity in a book so deeply dedicated to humanity is also one that is deplorable in many respects. To begin, the name Conchi is so over-the-top in its misogyny that it must be ironic; if it is not ironic then it must be indicted for its clear chauvinistic vulgarity. In one sense, this language might simply be an example of Cercas' creative inability to write female characters, a symptom of a limited artistic capacity. A dinner scene between Conchi and Cercas reads like a teenaged boy's fantasy; or, *it reads like bad prose*:

What are you like?' was her comment, accompanied by a look of disgust. 'How can you want to write about a fascist with the number of really good lefty writers there must be around! García Lorca, for example. He was a red, wasn't he? Ooh,' she said, not waiting for a reply, reaching under the table: alarmed, I lifted the table cloth up a bit and looked,

'God, my pussy's so itchy.'

'Conchi!' I scolded her in whisper, sitting up quickly and forcing a smile while glancing around at the neighbouring tables, 'I'd appreciate it, when you go out with me, if you'd at least wear panties.'

'What an old fart you are!' she said with her most affectionate smile, but without bringing the submerged hand out into the open; I felt her toes creeping up my calf.

'Don't you think it's sexy? Anyway, when do we start?'

'I've told you a million times I don't like doing it in public toilets.'

‘I didn’t mean that, dummy. I mean when do we start the book?’ (58)

How can a writer who utilizes such sophisticated academic language also express such a brutish, retrograde masculinity? Cercas’ depiction of Conchi is degrading, and is clearly a way to exercise his power as a “sophisticated”, academic, and masculine author; he creates an unrefined, immature, and hypersexual woman in his text, and then shames her, which bars Conchi from participating in the story as a fully-formed character. In his ugly creation of Conchi, her character’s interest in discovering the truth about Sánchez Mazas is subordinated to Cercas’ interest because he is serious about his work as a detective of public memory, and she is a ludicrous sexpot caricature who is as fascinated with the truth about the war as she is with public sex. Through this, Cercas alienates his readership, and diminishes the egalitarianism of his message.

That aside, Conchi as a fellow Spaniard says something about Cercas’ political orientation, but also (more subtly and darkly) about his notions of women, in general. Conchi as the foolish fortune-teller represents all that Cercas believes is wrong with Spain when it comes to the past and present meeting; Conchi is young, hypersexual, superstitious, ignorant of the “true” past, and Catholic (at least superficially). Conchi’s representation conflates the moronic potential voting body of the Partido Popular (and their quiet, continued celebration of Francoist history) with, essentially, all women of Spain, as none in this novel come to know the truth about Big History as male and liberal academics like Cercas know it. As the only woman in this novel, she is, quite matter-of-factly, femininity’s only representative in this literary microcosm of war and memory. What this says about writing memory of war and the representation of women is troubling because it not only places verisimilitude and remembrance solely in the hands

of a few male egalitarian elites like Cercas himself, but it also suggests that women are collaborators with a brutal past by way of their collective ignorance of these core expressions of the humanities. In a sense, Spanish women do not know the “truth” about the war, and must be enlightened by the haunted and quietly-misogynistic male *literati* of Cercas’ publishing world. His savior complex is a recurring theme in this vein of the war novel, and even though Conchi’s later support helps bolster Cercas to finish his investigation, the epiphanic moment between Miralles and Cercas is also a segregated moment, a veritable “no girls allowed” sign denoting the “seriousness” of war memory which Cercas implicitly suggests that the women could not possibly understand. Via this segregation, it is strongly implied, as well, that Conchi is an accessory to Cercas’ power as a writer—she is created and exists to validate his masculine worldview, to advance his agenda as an author, and to assist his cathartic expression through the written word. The suggestion that Conchi is “maternal (206)” is thus a cipher; as an author, a narrator, and a practitioner of male thought, if he does not assuage her worry that she will not “go to her grave childless” (35) through their fictional sexual relationship, then he will, at least, impregnate her character with truth.

That being said, Conchi functions beyond an object of desire for Cercas; as a tool of modern catharsis, Conchi a source of inspiration for Cercas, a modern-day muse. More than that, she validates his existence as a detective of public memory—the fictional plot and the novel itself could not have occurred without Conchi as a tool for Cercas’ writing. In the final act, Cercas considers the impact of Conchi on his writing. He states:

Conchi helped me, luckily: I now think that, if not for her, I would have abandoned the search early on. We called in our spare time, almost always

secretly, me from the editorial offices, her from the television studio. Then, every night, we'd compare notes on the day, exchange the name of ruled out residential homes, and during those conversations I realized that for Conchi, the monotony of daily telephone calls in search of a man who we didn't even know was alive was an unexpected and exciting adventure; and as for me, at first infected by Conchi's investigative drive and straightforward conviction, I bent to the task enthusiastically, but after I'd surveyed first thirty homes I began to suspect that I was it more out of inertia or stubbornness (or so as not to let Conchi down)...

(167-167)

In a similar maternal manner, the only other significant female character is María Ferré, one of the "forest friends" who altruistically assists Sánchez Mazas during his flight from the Republican forces hunting him—in spite of the fact that they too were Republican-sympathetic. By her name alone, María has an association with the biblical maternal. As a tool of modern catharsis, the existence of María assists Cercas in his desire to express pity through the text (pity in this case being ironic therefore postmodern as the reader should incomprehensibly pity a Falangist). Cercas' characterization of María exudes the essence of the Spanish maternal, a variation on the esthetic pioneered by *La pietà* of Michelangelo. She is, quite simply, maternal sanctuary personified. Cercas writes:

It's possible that at first Sánchez Mazas was to María Ferré just another of the many deserters who roamed during those days, and that's why she wasn't scared, but she always maintained that as soon as she saw his pitiful figure outlined against the ground of the path that ran past the yard, she cognized beneath the ravages of three days' exposure to the elements the unmistakable bearing of a

gentleman. Whether that's true or not, María gave the man the same kind of treatment she'd given countless other fugitives... María heated up the previous night's saucepan... he sat down on a bench, enjoying the nearness of the fire and the joyful promise of hot food, took off his soaking shoes and socks, and suddenly noticed a terrible ache in his feet and an infinite tiredness in his bony shoulders. María handed him a clean rag... (98)

María Ferré is a central point of a swirling nebula of maternal symbols (conflating the *maternal* with *caretaker*) in the novel. We see her as a possibly Mary, mother of Jesus of *La pietá*, who takes pity upon and embraces her broken son (a man who has endured a crucible). She may be a Mary of Bethany offering a rag so he may wash his own feet (an update to the trope, somewhat). Before he is cared for by María Ferré, Sánchez Mazas is imprisoned at “the Sanctuary of Santa María del Collell.” (88) Curiously, even Conchi becomes more maternal after María Ferré's entrance in the story; in the final act, Conchi is described as a “maternal fortune teller” (206) and it may be that she serves as María Ferré's spiritual successor, as well as the future mother to Cercas' children. Finally, María Ferré fulfills the general Spanish stereotype of the mother (with the ubiquitous Catholic name María) whom always has something for her weary child to eat. Coupled with these symbols, María Ferré is still subordinated to a masculine authorship via a troubling depiction of her as a woman enraptured by the undeniable charm which must emanate from Cercas the narrator. Reductively, Cercas the author makes another creative *faux pas* when he describes a conversation he has with one of the “forest friends,” Figueras, and a different meeting Cercas had with María Ferré earlier. It reads like bad, macho prose:



Figueras was tall and well-built, with an almost youthful air—checked shirt, sailor’s cap, well-worn jeans—a travelled man possessing an enormous vitality and a conversational manner erupting with gestures, exclamations and hearty laughs; María Ferré who, coquettishly visited the hairdresser’s before receiving me in her house in Cornellá de Terri—a house that at times had been the village bar and general store, and still at the entrance, almost like relics, stood a marble counter and a set of scales—was slight and sweet, digressive, with eyes that at one moments were mischievous and the next would brim with tears at her inability to dodge the tricks of nostalgia set for her in the course of her tale, young eyes, with the colour and fluidity of a summer stream. (61-62)

With her lachrymose comportment, María Ferré weeps for all of the broken men of the novel who cannot weep because Cercas’ writing is patently macho and retrograde when it comes to women; María Ferré is an example of the “histrionics of conventional femininities” (9) Judith Halberstam refers to in her book *Female Masculinity*. By crafting María as not only exceptionally emotional but also flirtatious toward the narrator, Cercas subordinates her to his masculine writing; it seems strange that she feels compelled to go to the hairdresser before she meets a much younger man, whom she has never met, for a platonic interview. Then again, this is Cercas’ idea of women in his writing—they are all overly-emotional and hypersexual, they mourn for, care for, or desire to sleep with the men of the novel; accordingly, it is implied that women are less serious about war and memory.

If this is not evidence enough of Cercas’ problematic female representations in his prose of war and memory, *it is important to understand that Cercas writes from a*

*tradition he accepts as categorically patriarchal.* In a 2005 interview with Juan Gabriel Vásquez, he spoke at length to his writing approach in the masculine Spanish transatlantic canon:

Well, you can't be conscious of your influences. But it's true that the more you assimilate, the better. Now I'm planning to write a book—I always want to write books and in the end I don't get them written—but I intend to write one that arises from Pier Paolo Pasolini said: "*I maestri si mangiano in salsa piccante*" [Maestros should be eaten in spicy sauce]. Because these writers who talk about "killing your father" always make me laugh. It's pretty normal in Latin America, no? Faced with the flowering of talents in the previous generation, the generation of the boom, many writers of our generation have committed the monumental error of saying, "No, actually they weren't good." Like that José Agustín Goytisolo line that goes, "Martin Luther King was not as black as they say nowadays." Well the same thing happens with the boom. García Márquez? Average. Vargas Llosa? Not bad. This Borges fellow? Barely mediocre... Sure, it's about killing the father. And I don't think you have to kill your father. What you have to do is kill him, carve him up, open up the guts, roast him, pour some spicy sauce over him, and eat him. That's assimilating the tradition and making it your own. That's real literature. (131)

Assuredly, Cercas destabilizes binaries concerning war and memory as he much as maintains gender stereotypes. Even as much as he alters the Spanish literary terrain as a postmodernist writer, as far as patriarchy goes, Cercas implies through his writing the common saying "*¡El rey ha muerto! ¡Viva el rey!*" ("The king is dead! Long live the

king!”). That being said, in a closer look the female characters of Cercas exist on the periphery to care for men as they only know how: as mothers or lovers. In contrast, the men of Cercas’ novel, burdened by war and memory like his narrator Cercas or Sánchez Mazas, are pitied and cared for by the marginalized female characters, so they (as men) may complete their most serious mission: to achieve modern catharsis.

Comparatively, American author O’Brien seeks to use women as tools of modern catharsis in his writing as well. Before the main female character of O’Brien’s story, Mary Anne Bell, is discussed, it is important to underline a central notion of the novel, which may be used as a cipher to explain more than the plot(s): the title, *The Things They Carried*, comes from the eponymous vignette which roundly states, “The things they carried were largely determined by necessity.” (2) Aside from the routinely-analyzed aspect of the soldiers of Alpha Company carrying things (not just tangible weight in the form of military gear and personal effects but psychological weight as well) is the notion of necessity as another figurative aspect of O’Brien’s storytelling: it is a necessity to use women in order to tell the sort of stories he wishes to tell. Among many other female representations, O’Brien needs Mary Anne Bell—once again, a Mary—in order to tell a particular sort of story. How she becomes a central device to his text of healing, how she is a tool of modern catharsis, is a complicated matter, to say the least.

To begin, a majority of the scholarship surrounding “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” almost always is in agreement that the character Mary Anne Bell—whose metamorphosis from Barbie into G.I. Joe into native Other—challenges the gender expectations of mid-twentieth century American women, especially those of the stereotypical girlie-girl cheerleader-turned-housewife; her character design in the story is

a willing rejection of the then-norm (and trope) of the All-American woman who marries the All-American man (the soldier, in this case). Her sweetheart moniker alludes not just to her connection to Fossie, her doting soldier-boyfriend, but to their love which coalesced when they became high school sweethearts—this being the epitome of (white suburban middle-class) heteronormative love in America for its implications of essential innocence, youth, chastity, community, Christian purity, capitalism, commitment, and a general, opaque Americanness. Scholars are keenly aware of O'Brien's deliberate attempt to confound the gender binary. Farrell claims "Sweetheart" "is a story about transgressing boundaries, particularly gender boundaries, but also racial distinctions, lines separating moral from immoral behavior, and even rules governing narrative." (262) As the story-within-a-story goes, medic Rat Kiley had been assigned to an isolated medical camp in the mountains during an earlier tour (before he linked up with Tim's Alpha Company), and swore that the following had occurred: a soldier of the detachment, Mark Fossie, had flown in his high school girlfriend, Mary Anne Bell, from the Cleveland with her "white culottes and this sexy pink sweater." (86) Fossie and Mary Anne whiled away their time together until, slowly but surely, Mary Anne's fascination with Vietnam and especially the Green Berets of the camp, lead to her eventual abandonment of Fossie after his failed attempt to control her with a marriage proposal. She loses her femininity forthwith during her grueling missions with the Green Berets, and eventually all of her civilized aspects disappear until, as O'Brien's narrator describes her, "had crossed to the other side. She was a part of the land." (110)

In order to evaluate the manner in which O'Brien's uses Mary Anne as a tool for his modern catharsis, it is important to highlight Kristeva's notion of women and their

relation to history, and therefore writing itself. She states, “‘Father’s time, mother’s species,’ Joyce put it; and, indeed, when evoking the name and destiny of women, one think more of the *space* generating and forming the human species than of *time*, becoming, or history.” (15) For Kristeva, women, because of their wombs, provide existence, whereas as men, not having the ability to be mothers, are simply documenting existence, and marking time, both literally and figuratively. Via their creation and patent of *logos*, men own language and meaning, they are the *philosophes*, but never own the *chora*, or the Platonic pre-symbolic of the womb. It is a pre-language space before birth, therefore before time. Once humans are born, they enter history, and are immediately subjected to male language and meaning—the symbolic. That being said, it is important to recognize the implications of O’Brien’s creation of Mary Anne. Alex Vernon claims she “defies gender expectations” (247) as she passes from woman to man to ungendered, she successfully alights herself from macho expectations of her femininity, and yet, she is a product of male language and meaning, and is unable to escape its ownership of her. According to Martin and Stiner, Mary Anne is not necessarily a feminist icon; they state:

Far from issuing in a healthy model of feminist liberation, Mary Anne’s transformation is ultimately shocking and morally ambiguous... As a feminist ideal, Mary Anne is... extremely problematic; she may challenge sexist stereotypes, but she nevertheless also challenges the very humanity on which a more just, equitable, and authentic sense of womanhood could be founded.

(100-101)

Obviously this alludes to the moral bankruptcy of the American mission in Vietnam (if not the male-dominated trajectory the world follows via business, geopolitics, and

justice), but it is also a current among scholarship which generally seems to agree with O'Brien's need to go beyond gender; instead of an antagonism towards women, O'Brien sees femininity as the less important than war e.g. inhumanity. For O'Brien, femininity is less essential than inhumanity when examining the deepest part of being human; not surprisingly, academics read this inhumanity as evidence of the influence of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Martin and Stiner state:

O'Brien's theme, like Conrad's, is clearly existentialist: Kurtz and Mary Anne respectively undergo a profound transformation in the jungle, abandoning civilized modes of behavior and in the process radically challenging conventional notions of human identity. Kurtz and Mary Anne do more than merely go native; indeed, they seem—at least to their respective observers Marlow and Rat Kiley—to cross over some essential boundary into subhuman savagery and thereby apocalyptically reveal previously unsuspected dimensions of human nature. (94)

This evaluation by Martin and Stiner is troublesome because it reinforces the destructive notion that Mary Anne's femininity is not a part of her concrete humanness, but *only* a gender performance *a lá* Judith Butler (a notion supported by Alex Vernon). In contrast to the argument advanced in this paper, Martin and Stiner, among other scholars, believe Mary Anne's transformation is a liberation, and see an Oedipal cipher in the decoupling of Mary Anne from her gender expectations; they state:

Rat's judgment of Mary Anne remains radically uncertain. She is an endlessly provocative enigma for Rat—the riddle of the Sphinx that he must answer before he can move on—yet which he remains paralyzed and powerless to resolve. She is, on the other hand, worthy of love, and admiration, for she has courageously

cast off all of the inauthentic attributes of human selfhood. On the other hand, she seems to have gone so far as to cast off human selfhood altogether, transforming herself into something at once still familiar and yet strangely unrecognizable.

(102)

While a valid argument, it assumes that Mary Anne's journey is one of individual choice by a fully-formed character, and not an abstraction of male desire created by the fantasies of three different men—Fossie (whose tastes initially drive her fashion choices, apparently), Rat (for possibly fabricating Mary Anne *entirely*), and O'Brien the writer (for duplicating Rat's story and possibly adding his own flourishes)—and whose characterization now alludes to one of the foundational sources of the patriarchy's symbolic order, the Oedipus story.

The problem with the ultimate degendering of Mary Anne is *not* that it is a wrong way to denounce all of humanity's ability to be savage to itself (indeed, O'Brien's attempt at this is deft and impactful), but that it shows, as well, that woman is a tool to validate man's new found understanding of humanity (e.g. himself really) through his writing. Instead of a participant in this didactic process, she is a component to be manipulated. Vernon claims, "Perhaps, though, Mary Anne has moved through femininity and through masculinity to a place beyond gender," (250) and we are to think that O'Brien's notion of femininity is the only available expression of it. Helene Cixous would see this as an example of male authors seeing femininity as they presume it to be (later known as 'mansplaining'); she declares: "I write woman: woman must write woman. And man, man. So only an oblique consideration will be found here of man; it's up to him to say where his masculinity and femininity are at: this will concern us once

men have opened their eyes and seen themselves clearly.” (877) Although her cartoonish and macabre pastiche of feminine and masculine identifiers—“wearing her culottes, her pink sweater, and a necklace of human tongues” (110)—makes her a postmodern critique of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century expectations for the suburban white female, she is still only a device, a move by the author to advance an opinion; she ultimately has no interiority that is her own. Erased of her femininity in O’Brien’s story, Mary Anne is not more human (as O’Brien would like you to think of her) in her matched ability to be as savage as men, she is, instead, even *less human*.

Huidobro said the poet is a small god, and O’Brien is Mary Anne’s Creator. She is under the law of the Father (in this case, O’Brien’s law of storytelling); even if she is created as an intended feminist icon, she is a tool in a story, ultimately, about the nature of a male war storytelling. O’Brien’s Mary Anne is trapped in male language and meaning; she exists so male veterans like O’Brien can attempt to understand the animalistic brutality of war. Thusly, she is created and then sacrificed to heal the soldier’s psychological wounds. She is created to support his craftwork of the symbolic, his creation of the mythos of which he can understand the world. Most striking, however, is the fact that O’Brien ultimately wrote Mary Anne as a female character seeking masculinity, not degendering. She does not seek a feminine variety detached from maleness, but a male masculinity (O’Brien creates a woman, makes her want to be a man, and thereby obliterates her femininity); he states in an interview with Daniel Bourne and Debra Shostak in 1991:

It goes to what stories are, in a way. Stories, retold, carry the force of legend.

There’s a sense of legend in that the story is still going out there somewhere.



Huck is still going down that river, Ahab is still chasing that whale. Legends have to do with the repetition of things. Though there's a narrative end to *Moby-Dick*, there's a sense, as in all stories, that everyone is still out there, still doing things, forever and ever. Mary Anne Bell is still out there in the dark, chasing masculinity, an obsession with this stuff forever. She's still wearing that necklace of tongues. (85)

By rejecting sexist notions from previous generations, he does not hate women. That being said, O'Brien still flounders through creating fully-formed female representations because women are tools of his text of healing, his novelistic modern catharsis. Through a patriarchal system of language and meaning, O'Brien is mansplaining femininity's place in war. It is a situation where women, ignorant of combat, would do well to learn from it by being created in his stories, suffer through it fictionally therefore didactically, and be doomed to an eternity desperately seeking the truth of the dark side of the human condition—that truth being a very masculine truth.

The trouble with the masculine viewpoint in this text appears to be most clear in a vignette that complements the gender discussion alluded to in "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong"; this being the infamous "How to Tell a True War Story." In the vignette, O'Brien returns to his perennial theme of verisimilitude and is once again discussing the eerie, unsettling, and yet beautiful death of Curt Lemon (the Lemon Tree) during his tour. Earlier in the story, he tersely states, "it comes down to gut instinct. A true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe." (74) In this moment, he exudes a gruff masculinity typical of a former infantryman, which makes sense since that is who the narrator (and author) is. Now, with that tone in mind, the following excerpt makes for an

interesting examination of O'Brien's troubled depiction of masculinity that plays with the chauvinistic. Tim the narrator states:

Now and then, when I tell this story, someone will come up to me afterward and say she liked it. It's always a woman. Usually it's an older woman of kindly temperament and humane politics. She'll explain that as a rule she hates war stories; she can't understand why people want to wallow in all the blood and gore. But this one she liked. The poor baby buffalo, it made her sad. Sometimes, even, there are little tears. What should I do, she'll say, is put it all behind me. Find new stories to tell.

I won't say it but I'll think it.

I'll picture Rat Kiley's face, his grief, and I'll think, *You dumb cooze*.

Because she wasn't listening.

It *wasn't* a war story. It was a *love* story.

But you can't say that. (80-81)

Scholars have identified this moment as an example of the misogyny expressed in O'Brien's writing; Chris Vanderwees comments on this moment by saying, "Granted, throughout *The Things They Carried*, there is a reoccurring theme of men expressing contempt for women who did not participate in the war." (196) Most think this is misogynistic, but also typically explain it away as a matter of postmodern style and O'Brien's ultimate desire to get a conversation started about the different ways in which men and women experience war; Vanderwees adds:

It becomes important to distinguish between O'Brien the author and O'Brien the character, as their views may overlap, but also differ significantly. O'Brien the narrator is upset as he believes that this woman cannot comprehend the story, she was not in Vietnam... His frustration with the woman at the reading highlights the type of masculinity that the text itself attempts to critique. O'Brien the author does not believe that women are incapable of performing soldierly duties. (197)

While I agree that this moment has its merit in a critique of masculinity within the roughneck world of old soldiers telling war stories, it also seems to think it is okay to be misogynistic author just as long as it is done in a postmodern way; or, it's fine to ridicule all women as long as you can playfully claim your narrator (with your name) is a chauvinist, not you the author. In this sense, it's a game, a clever dodge, as postmodernists are wont to do; if all is unstable, then no one and nothing is accountable. The problem with this is that it makes for alienating prose; whether this is fiction or not avoids the fact that this prose claims that educated, older women with literary opinions are dumb coozes. Accordingly, the erudition of the text is reduced by this particular "truth." In the same vein of film directors creating ultraviolent movies in order to critique violence, writing misogynist prose in order to critique it *also looks very much like an indulgence in it*. O'Brien may not be a died-in-the-wool misogynist of his father's era, sometimes he just clumsily becomes one to make a point about a different topic. In this way, it actually affirms some an odd response O'Brien made in an interview with Steven Kaplan in 1991 regarding Mary Anne Bell's characterization and O'Brien's opinion on gender:

KAPLAN: Do you think there are differences between the way men and women react to situations of extreme stress?

O'BRIEN: I don't. I think that too much has been made of gender, way too much has been made of it, by both sides. Under situations of stress and in situations of incredible danger and trauma, women are capable, as men are, of great evil, of great good, and of all shades in between.

What I am trying to show, what I am trying to open the door to, is the possibility that we aren't that different. We're different, yes, but we're not that different. We all experience anger. We experience lust. We experience terror. We experience curiosity and fascination for that which repels us. All of us. (60-61)

While this shows a side of O'Brien that he might call his humanistic side, it also betrays his myopia when it comes to his own white male privilege concerning the lack of difference between men and women; note that he evaluates experience at the lowest common denominator, while avoiding the myriad ways in which experience is massively different (e.g. growing up as a girl, female identity at any age for that matter, living in fear of rape just because you're a woman, the male enterprise of rape and war that was (ostensibly) the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the difficulties of motherhood in general, living with double standards as a woman, Spivak's subaltern, etc.). By commenting this way, O'Brien doesn't hate women inasmuch as he dismisses femininity as a serious topic (by conflating it with gender, then dismissing gender because war is a serious enterprise, written about by serious men). If we're all alike (as a white male American writer sees it), then any difference is just an annoyance, and perhaps even an obstacle to the concurrence he hopes

for with his reader on the most serious matter at hand: war—through his coy, winking masculine viewpoint.

Perhaps this evaluation is too hard on O'Brien, though. Another perspective could help shed light on the unique relationship he has with femininity. In an interview with Brian C. McNerney in 1994, O'Brien is asked, yet again, to confront the "How to Tell a True War Story." McNerney's question and O'Brien's response will be included in total length because it encapsulates a writing ethic and a worldview of the author that is complicated, and therefore should not be misrepresented:

MCNERNEY: There is, for example, the business at the end of "How to Tell a True War Story," where the woman comes up and says that she doesn't like war stories. And I guess some critics have said before, "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong," is a kind of answer to the depiction of women which may present them as less understanding or less in contact with the emotional force of what's going on in your war stories.

O'BRIEN: I believe that, by and large, women in America don't like war stories. That is, if you asked a cross-section of women demographically selected, "Would you read a war story?" or "Would you prefer war stories to love stories, father stories, mother stories, son stories," I believe you are going to find the dominant statistical answer being, "Women don't like war stories." It doesn't mean that women are perspicacious. It doesn't mean that they are not smart. It doesn't mean that they are not intuitive. It means that women prefer not to read war stories. The question becomes then *why*? And my answer to that is a cultural one. It is that because women are excluded by law from serving in combat, and up until recently

were really discriminated against from serving in the armed forces in general. I believe they still are to some extent. This exclusion explains, I think, why women would prefer not to read about something with which they cannot identify. Beyond that, another reason that women may not like war stories has to do with how war stories oftentimes are bad stories—full of cliché, blood, death, bullets, purposeless stereotypes, glorification of war. All these are valid reasons not to like war stories. And so when the woman at the end of “How to Tell a True Story” says, “Ordinarily I don’t like war stories, this one I liked,” it is supposed to be a backhanded compliment to that woman. This war story she liked because, I hope, it isn’t stereotypical, isn’t predictable, isn’t melodramatic. It touches a woman’s spirit the same way it would touch a man’s spirit. (96)

Now, to comment on this section, it would seem that O’Brien clarifies that he does not, categorically, hate women or think them to be inferior. Nevertheless, his rhetoric of statistics is a bit detached from any sort of real fact (but once again—this is fiction), and so he is free to paint with broad strokes. What seems to happen here is that O’Brien displays an essentialist attitude toward women and their place in the war discourse; going along with his problematic acceptance of *purposeful* stereotypes (whatever those might be), it is the problem that O’Brien has with seeing most women (see: broad strokes) and their distaste for war stories, is that it implies that a difference in “spirit” between the men and women makes their comprehension almost always at odds with each other, as if men and women were somehow different species. Ultimately, it is a retrograde attitude cloaked in complements: women are smart, but *men know things*. The statement O’Brien continues with (from the interview with McNerney) could best be described as frustration

that may have manifested itself during his formative years of college (before his tour in Vietnam) or shortly thereafter, because it reads like a cultural critique within his own generational context of the '60s. O'Brien says:

What I'm criticizing is the culturally caused statistical propensity on the part of women to not give war stories the same open-minded consideration that I would give to a story about a feminist and a professor in a college. If it is expected that I should be able to read *Madame Bovary*, a book about a woman written by a man, I can expect that a woman, through acts of imagination, acts of cultural identification, acts of socialization, would someday write a war story as good as any I could write. What I'm doing is criticizing a culture that unfairly has excluded women from the responsibility of taking part in a social phenomenon: war. (96)

Claiming that a double standard exists might be fine if an even playing field for experience were available, in this sense (see: white American male persecution complex). O'Brien feels unjustly judged for writing about war in certain way, in a way that alienates some people, and feels like more women would appreciate his writing if they too had experienced war. As a celebrated and canonized war novelist, O'Brien meekly strokes his ego by claiming that he would give the benefit of the doubt (like he has) to a woman writer if she could write a war novel as amazing as his (note the humility in his words). Feeling like he has been singled-out for simply writing about masculine experience as he has experienced it, thus begins the part of the interview where his perhaps-justified bitterness towards a male-only draft is all but clear. Once again, providing a fuller quote

with allow for the author represent his attitudes as accurately as possible. This moment also comes from O'Brien's interview with McNerney, and the author states:

There is another level to my response to feminist criticism to my work that is a little angry. And that level is that it seems to me that women are going to have to acknowledge that men are being treated unfairly when they are sent to war. I don't think women have thought about it much. I think women, by and large, in western society take it for granted that they don't have to serve in combat, and it's not even thought about much. It's just a given. It's as if God has somehow granted a divine right to women: *You don't have to die in combat. You don't have to go through this horror.* Well, God didn't mandate this privilege, man did. Law did. Tradition did. Culture did. It seems to me that excluding women from combat is a clear violation of the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment of our Constitution. We should all be treated fairly. Why not draft blacks, or only draft Albanians, or only draft Italians? There would be a revolution in this country in any cases. "How to Tell a True Story" is meant to call attention to a fundamental inequity. Half of our population is excluded from the horror of serving in combat. I want to call attention to that.

I want to say that I think there is an unsubstantiated belief that gender determines bellicosity. Based on people like Lizzie Borden or Catherine the Great, I can't say that women are absolutely and utterly nonviolent creatures. It seems to me to be a kind of denigration of women to contend such a thing. To say "We are not capable of belligerence, we're not capable of anger, we're not capable of this" seems to me to denigrate women. The so-called feminists who say, "We, the



women, are the nurturers, we are the lovers; we are the child-bearers of the world; we are endowed with a God-given goodness that men are not endowed with” is to violate a fundamental humanity about women. The experience of the human race is that women know what sin is, know what evil is, and have participated in both in their ways. I’m rebelling against a stereotype. I would think a feminist would be applauding me for this. I would think a feminist would be saying, “You are right!—our gender doesn’t make us less human. (96-97)

As stated before, O’Brien levels a criticism at feminism for its critique of his work, but it is important to evaluate what his views actually imply, what sort of feminism he is discussing (or thinks he is discussing), and ultimately how this shows what sort of femininity and masculinity we see in *The Things They Carried*. Firstly, he is bitter about men only being drafted, and assuredly this is a problem for equitable treatment under the law, but this criticism also overlooks a few things: women *are* in “combat” because they have died by the millions in every war humanity has ever seen, it is simply that they die as non-combatants (mostly) and/or are raped, therefore they know horror (an oversight on his part, but indeed, only men are pressed into service and this was a problem during Vietnam); his argument assumes combat is a social phenomenon (a cloudy, fraternal phrasing) and not just simply a euphemism for destruction and mayhem (*many people* would rather not participate in this macabre “social phenomenon”, and that is a justifiable impulse); he denounces second-wave feminist belligerence toward men but overlooks the fact that war is the ultimate phallic enterprise (he doesn’t own up to the reality that men are responsible for this, he avoids it); his evocation of nurturing overlooks the problem that he (or Tim the narrator) and all of the men of Alpha Company *have or had mothers*

*who suffered as well* (war destroys during “combat” and at home, all the same); as a discourse dedicated to evaluating subjugation and the subjugated, feminism is keenly aware that humans (not just men) are destructive, but that it is a system of language and meaning that ultimately drives both men and women to harm themselves and others because patriarchy does that (he is almost a feminist himself in this respect when he criticizes law, culture, and tradition, but does not give the oppressor its real name: *again, patriarchy*); and finally, his notion that men suffer as well overlooks the fact that feminism is concerned just as much with male well-being as it is with female because *it is a discourse designed to criticize patriarchy and toxic masculinity, not men writ large*. A great example of this would be theorist Judith Halberstam’s concern for women *as well as men* when she states:

Some people asked me during the writing of this book also to consider the toll that masculinity takes on boys and men and to recognize that masculinity is not simply privilege, but that sometimes it may also be a burden. I think compulsory masculinity is a burden on many different kinds of men and boys, and it takes a toll in a variety of ways from extreme physical damage to the self within sports to extreme violence directed at others. (273-274)

She goes on to explain, though, that this pity has its limits when the destructive realities of white male masculinity are considered:

It is hard to be very concerned about the burden of masculinity on males, however, if only because it so often expresses itself through the desire to destroy others, often women. Indeed, this dual mechanism of a lack of care for the self

and a callous disregard for the care of others seems to characterize much that we take for granted about white male masculinity. (274)

This need to create female characters in order to destroy them—in the case of O’Brien, to create a woman then destroy her to make a statement about inhumanity, so we can fear our collective (degendered) potential for inhumane behavior—is also simply a sexual desire, a longing for women. War stories are usually written from the point of view of lonely, sexually-frustrated (heterosexual) men, and rightly so. Wars, being that they are fought almost exclusively by male soldiers, mean that men are isolated from traditional bonding with women (barring rape, which is not a traditional activity, but is not uncommon either). To write a tale of modern catharsis, writers like O’Brien create women for the lonely soldiers to pine after, so we can feel pity for them. After all, O’Brien admits that “It *wasn’t* a war story. It was a *love* story,” (81) and we must examine to what extent women—as lovers and love interests—are formed into tools of modern catharsis in the O’Brien war novel.

As we have already examined, a part from being the most complicated portrait of femininity in *The Things They Carried*, Mary Anne Bell is also an object of desire so we may consider, therefore pity, male isolation during combat. Scholars tend to explain this creation in psychological terms, and call attention to the crossroads between general imagination, sexual fantasy, and patriarchal mythos which the female lover (or love interest) occupies in the O’Brien war novel. Alex Vernon explains:

[The soldiers’] collectively created image of Mary Anne as a mystery is as reductive as Mark Fossie’s first vision of her as sweetheart and wife. If Fossie’s first vision rehashes conventional social gender patterns and expectations, so does

the collective image of Mary Anne reinscribe the collective mythic image of the strong woman as an untouchable, unseeable Diana—a mythic object, but an object nonetheless. A nonperson. The sexuality of the story’s language and Mary Anne’s bodily relationship with her world and herself mark this tale as one spun from excitable male imagination. She wants to “eat this place,” to “swallow the whole country” and “have it there inside”; she feels like she’s glowing in the dark” and “on fire almost” (111); she wants, finally, “to penetrate deeper into the mystery of herself” (114). All the soldiers, O’Brien’s narrator tells us, were a little in love with Mary Anne. She is either a body in front of them or a mystery beyond them, either way teasing them in their desire to penetrate her. (250)

Along with the lover/love interest representation of the female in O’Brien’s writing is a curious intersection which occurs between his creation of a lover/love interest and a daughter representation in *The Things They Carried* and a 1994 New York Times article entitled “The Vietnam in Me.” Doubtlessly, there is plenty of scholarship related to verisimilitude and this connection; the girlfriend Kate of “The Vietnam in Me” and the daughter Kathleen of the novel, sharing a name, obviously suggests O’Brien’s continued play with fact and fiction. Beyond this aspect, however, is the way in which Kate in the article and Kathleen of the novel fulfill the same function as tools of catharsis, just in a subtly different way, as they have different relationships with O’Brien/Tim the narrator. “Vietnam in Me” is essentially a writing piece dedicated to O’Brien returning to Vietnam, with his lover/love interest at the time Kate, in order to visit the places his Army unit patrolled and where his friends perished or were maimed, and the locals his unit harmed or fought against. In a meaningful, touching moment, O’Brien lets go of the

past (a little), the cathartic moment facilitated by the tenderness he shares with Kate. In a touching choice of words, he explains:

Our fingers lock, which happens without volition, and we stand looking out on a wide and very lovely field of rice. The sunlight gives it some gold and yellow. There is no wind at all. Before us is how peace would be defined in a dictionary for the speechless. I don't cry. I don't know what to do. At one point I hear myself talking about what happened here so long ago, motioning out at the rice, describing chaos and horror beyond anything I would experience until a few months later. I tell her how Paige lost his lower leg, how we had to probe for McElhaney in the flooded paddy, how the gunfire went on and on, how in the course of two hell-on-earth hours we took 13 casualties.

I doubt Kate remembers a word. Maybe she shouldn't. But I do hope she remembers the sunlight striking that field of rice. I hope she remembers the feel of our fingers. I hope she remembers how I fell silent after a time, just looking out at the golds and yellows, joining the peace, and how in those fine sunlit moments, which were ours, Vietnam took a little Vietnam out of me. (15)

Whether or not she existed or was a creation of O'Brien, in terms of storytelling, Kate the lover as a writing device exists to help O'Brien experience his modern catharsis, his letting go of the past. Noting his psychological trauma, O'Brien relays that "it was Kate who insisted we come here" (3) in order to experience this catharsis. As a writer of texts of healing, healing moments are paramount, and O'Brien crafts his female characters to validate his male soldiers' and their trauma from the war.

As stated before, the Kathleen daughter representation from the novel functions essentially in the manner as a tool of modern catharsis, validating Tim the narrator's trauma and facilitating his healing process, albeit different through her perspective as Tim's offspring. While examining story-truth and its superiority to happening-truth in the vignette "Good Form," Tim the narrator's daughter appears during his remembrance of a man he saw die during combat (happening-truth), a man he didn't actually kill but whose death feels guilty for, so it is a death he claims was his fault (story-truth). Drawing out these truths like venom from a snakebite, her presence facilitates his catharsis, his healing process. Tim the narrator states:

What stories can do, I guess, is make things present.

I can look at things I never looked at. I can attach faces to grief and love and pity and God. I can be brave. I can make myself feel again.

"Daddy, tell the truth," Kathleen can say, "did you ever kill anybody?" And I can say, honestly, "Of course not."

Or I can say, honestly, "Yes." (172)

Powerful in its resonance with the reader, O'Brien's prose explores war and memory at a fundamental human level, far from traditional ideologies. And yet, he crafts another female character—a daughter this time—to make his text of healing more impactful. In an article in the *Baltimore Sun* in 2001, Arthur Hirsch wrote about O'Brien and a talk he gave at Towson University. A question regarding fatherhood and war experience was asked, O'Brien replied, "I have no children... Kathleen is made up" (Hirsch, "To tell you the truth, O'Brien writes fiction") Although O'Brien is not a misogynist, his craft reflects

an deeply-ingrained component of writing that uses flat characterization of women to validate male experience, or more pointedly in this case, male catharsis; as Michael reiterates in her book *Feminism and the Postmodern Impulse*, “the subordination of women [is] within the very structure of Western thought.” (33) Whether O’Brien is aware of it or not, his creation of flat female characters is not just a simple stroke of fiction, a flourish of his writing, but an unconscious expression of patriarchy via a text which bills itself as humane; along these lines, by creating Kathleen to serve his authorial intentions, O’Brien becomes a patriarch *par excellence*, within his prose and without. In short, the question is not *if* Kate and Kathleen exist, but *why* they exist. Essentially, their reason for being is to facilitate male catharsis and male writing; to tell a masculine war story, one must use femininity as a tool.

## CHAPTER 5: CINEMATIC INTERPRETATIONS OF THE NOVELS OF CERCAS AND O'BRIEN

*Soldiers of Salamis* and *The Things They Carried* are not just war novels. Their stories have been reinterpreted through cinematic visions, and in some cases, the femaleness of each novel has changed significantly. Art historian Griselda Pollock, evaluates the impact of image along the lines of Barthes' idea of its intersection with semiotics. Pollock is inspired by Laura Mulvey's notion of the male gaze; or, the idea that "a woman performs within the narrative, the gaze of the spectator and that of the male characters in the film are neatly combined without breaking narrative verisimilitude." (443) Channeling Mulvey, Pollock reminds us of what visual representations of femininity can suggest:

Barthes swiftly discovered that images are always polysemic, contingent, dynamic and historically situated, serving class or national interests. Semiotics shows that images are never innocent visual reflections of the world; nor are they merely the artist's or maker's intentions directly expressed. They are mediated representations open to varied, unstable, contested readings, and images work on us to convince us that their 'vision' is real, true, natural. Images, therefore, need to be deciphered in relation to cultural practices, social histories, and the interests of the dominant class, race, gender and sexuality.

Feminist theory uses a new tool bag but attends to gender and sexual difference—always in a complex, asymmetrical relation to class, race, and sexuality—in ways



which founding masculine theorists of these new theories and methods often remained blind. Feminists have transformed these terms asking: who is represented and who does the representing? Who is seen and who is looking? Whose interests does an image encode, whose eroticism and desire? Who becomes the object or sign of that desire? The first work is to deconstruct existing regimes of representation: identifying the dominant ‘story’ allows us to determine what it excludes so as to discover how a phallogocentric culture does not represent women, feminine desire(s) and difference(s). (174-175)

Utilizing Pollock’s ideas, Cercas’ novel has undergone the greatest transformation from written work, and is a great example of a reinterpretation which asks these vital questions. Directed by David Trueba, the film version of *Soldados de Salamina* premiered in 2003, two years after the novel’s publication. Among many changes which occur between the film and the text, the most significant is Trueba’s decision to replace the main character Javier Cercas with a female lead, Lola Cercas (played by Ariadna Gil). To begin, replacing Javier with Lola eliminates the slimy misogyny which the author exhibits when gazing upon his female characters; markedly, Lola and Conchi (played by María Botto) have a homosexual attraction (and Conchi remains hypersexualized), but this connection remains unrequited, therefore the female body is not used as a tool to advance a story about war and memory—these themes emerge as independent because Lola is desexualized. In terms of the change from man to woman with the protagonist, María Cristina C. Mabrey evaluates this for its rhetorical potential. She states:

Además, teniendo en cuenta que el director cambia de protagonistas subvirtiendo—quizá la única subversión merecedora de ser reseñada—el deseo de

Javier Cercas de ser autor y actor en su propia novela, se tendrá en cuenta que Lola permite ver la misma historia con otra mirada, la femenina. (3)

(“Furthermore, taking into account that the director changes protagonists subverting—perhaps the only subversion worthy of review—the desire of Javier Cercas to be an author and actor in his own novel, one shall take into account that Lola allows for the same history to be seen with a different look, the feminine one”)

This new feminine look at the same history does exactly what Mabrey claims, it subverts, it is a destabilization of the traditional male way of viewing a national history; through this, subverting history becomes an exercise in subverting male authorship. Basically, by Trueba changing his protagonist from a man to a woman, this allows the camera’s lens to function as Lola’s eyes, thereby reinscribing war and memory in Spain. They become new, reinvigorated, and resituated discourses; in short, Lola’s presence displaces Cercas’ misogyny by displacing his male gaze. Coupled with this, Lola’s feminine gaze resists the remnants of Francoism which Cercas the author tacitly allows by devoting a grand majority of his novel to the study of the plight of a Falangist, and she becomes an example of active, independent female participation in the poetics of war and memory; Mabrey states:

Ella ofrece una nueva mirada a la historia; una mirada no impregnada de pasado falangista que Cercas corrobora en largas páginas... La mujer en la actualidad es actor de la historia. (6) (“She offers a new gaze on history; a gaze not impregnated by a Falangist past that Cercas corroborates at great length... Woman in actuality is an actor of history.”)

Similarly, the cinematic adaptation of O'Brien's writing offers an alternative appraisal of the image and the feminine. Centered exclusively on the vignette "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong," director Thomas Michael Donnelly brought *A Soldier's Sweetheart* to the small screen in 1998. Starring Georgina Cates as Mary Anne Bell, Kiefer Sutherland as Rat Kiley, and Skeet Ulrich as Mark Fossie, the TV movie attempts to accurately convey O'Brien drifting, mysterious prose in the form of a linear plot. The background of the film utilizes typical tropes of the Vietnam War film genre; Donnelly labors under an enormous Oliver Stone crush, as *A Soldier's Sweetheart* is, in a way, just a stylistic continuation of *Platoon*. Colliding with this, Donnelly feels he needs to create a romance. His directorial craft is caught between genres, but through this, he accurately captures Rat's exaggerated narrative style and the idyllic atmosphere surrounding Fossie and Mary Anne's relationship during the initial phase of her stay at the medical camp. By "idyllic", I mean that the lens is pure male gaze, and Mary Anne is accurately depicted as the *ingénue* from Cleveland Heights which O'Brien created; as Luce Irigaray notes, "*the gaze is always at stake from outset,*" (431) and as viewers we are forced to see Mary Anne through a phallic gaze, as she grows fonder and fonder of her rifle, conforming to Freudian penis envy. Setting up her transformation, the various mythos of the film are made clear: the medical camp is described as a "Shangri-la" in order to highlight the picturesque nature of the a white heteronormative romance against a vague Orientalist backdrop (the cinematic *Shangri-la* provides the appropriate postmodern intertextuality); the Green Berets—channeling Martin Sheen's killer instinct and thousand-yard stare in *Apocalypse Now*—are a collective apotheosis of an American machismo when compared to the boyish, lackadaisical medical troops who may as well be on summer vacation; and

Mary Anne is the mythos of the Amazonian warrior as she becomes increasingly obsessed by war (beginning with her first foray into rifle marksmanship). Straining to stay faithful to O'Brien's text, Donnelly's male gaze drinks in Mary Anne's innocent sexuality while he tries to push her towards the Conradian oblivion the Green Berets endure beyond the wire; the butterfly becomes a grotesque symbol as Mary Anne emerges from her chrysalis as a battle-hardened female member of the Green Beret unit. In the key point of divergence, Mary Anne's wardrobe does not conform to O'Brien's pastiche of the feminine and masculine; in the film, as Mary Anne "[crosses] to the other side" (110) without her necklace of tongues or her pink sweater and culottes. In Donnelly's interpretation, Mary Anne simply goes from stereotypical feminine to stereotypical masculine—she abandons the culottes for the standard dress of the American foot soldier, with its camouflage, boots, and implied roughneck attitude. Masculinized, she pulls her hair up in a ponytail and becomes a tomboy; this binary approach might signify the heteronormative view of the director, or perhaps this version of Mary Anne was thought to be more accessible to an American television audience of the late nineties. Ultimately, O'Brien's nuance toward Mary Anne as a tool of modern catharsis is lost in an ending which could best be described as an homage to the final battle in Stone's *Platoon*; after concluding the Mary Anne Bell story, Rat and his buddies are overrun by the Vietcong, and in the final moments, Rat sees the mythic Mary Anne stalking the battlefield, "ready for the kill." (110) He joins Mary Anne in combat and they disappear into the fog of war, the potential for feminist discourse being drowned out by the cacophony of battle (combat scenes tend to be thought-terminating, in this respect). Conclusively, Donnelly conforms to O'Brien's storytelling model—the

perennial question of verisimilitude—but misses the ambiguity the author intended to convey with his construction of Mary Anne Bell. While viewers still look upon her with masculine eyes, her far more mundane transformation ensures that there is far less to discuss about the film version of her characterization than how she is written in the original text of O'Brien.

## CONCLUSION

All things considered, navigating two works from disparate linguistic canons—the Spanish transatlantic and the American English—ensures limitations for comparative study. Simply put, when reading the works for how the feminine is used to tell a story, we should acknowledge their impact on Western literature as much as we specify that these two postmodern war novels—*Soldiers of Salamis* and *The Things They Carried*—are reflections of their proper national communities and their distinct authors; as unique but related works go, they are mirrors of themselves as much as they are incongruent. The use of women as tools of catharsis is an extension of the continued patriarchal aspect of Western thought, therefore it is decidedly problematic, if not pernicious. Javier Cercas and Tim O'Brien, not without exhibiting symptoms of misogyny, *use women as stylistic and rhetorical tools*; tools to understand the pain of war, and to find comfort while recovering the memory of the past. These male authors had mothers, have been in love, and express a love for humanity, and yet their stories do contain flat characterization of women. We have found examples which show that the mother/lover/daughter figure serves to heal and guide the male protagonist of the war novel, so it should be understood that *woman in general* serves to validate a male authorial perspective. War may harm all, but in the war novel, woman is an assistant to man as he struggles to examine the memory of the war; as we are to understand it, the truth is known mostly by *him*, not so much by *her*.

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