Journal of Ecohumanism
January 2022
Volume: 1, No: 1, pp. 57 – 71
ISSN: 2752-6798 (Print) | ISSN 2752-6801 (Online)
journals.tplondon.com/ecohumanism

TRANSNATIONAL PRESS® LONDON

Received: 1 October 2021 Accepted: 5 January 2022
DOI: https://doi.org/10.33182/joe.v1i1.1904

# 'They Carried the Land Itself:' Eco-Being, Eco-Trauma, and Eco-Recovery in Tim O'Brien's The Things They Carried

James M. Cochran[1]

***Abstract***

*This essay calls for a wider use of Tina Amorok's (2007) concepts of eco-Being, eco-trauma of Being, and eco-recovery of Being in ecocritical literary studies. I propose the adoption of Amorok's concepts as a literary hermeneutic because it provides a theoretical model that positions ecological damage as central to wartime trauma. To demonstrate the effectiveness of Amorok's framework, the following essay reads Tim O'Brien's 1990 novel The Things They Carried alongside Amorok's eco-Being, eco-trauma, and eco-recovery. Reading O'Brien's text through Amorok's model is particularly intriguing and noteworthy because almost no critics investigate the ecocritical dimensions of O'Brien's novel. Yet, despite the absence of green scholarship surrounding O'Brien's novel, Amorok's framework, as I will show, draws attention to the environmental costs of war as depicted in O'Brien's novel. Applying Amorok's model as an ecocritical lens to The Things They Carried demonstrates how we can use Amorok's tripartite structure to further unpack the ecological dimensions of fiction that seemingly have little to do with the environment.*

***Keywords:*** *Eco-Trauma; Dark Ecology; Twentieth-Century American Literature; War Fiction*

## Introduction

When most critics analyze Tim O'Brien's 1990 novel *The Things They Carried*, they focus on the traumatic experiences of O'Brien and other veterans in Vietnam. Psychological readings are common. For example, in her 1998 article, Tina Chen argues that O'Brien's desire to constantly revisit and rewrite war stories is a symptom of the displaced "veteran experience," and more recently, in her 2011 article, Catherine Rolen argues that connection between storytelling is essential to traumatic recovery in O'Brien's fiction. For many critics, trauma and recovery from that trauma are central to O'Brien's text.

Another popular area of critical study for O'Brien's works is eco-criticism. In "The Legacy of the American War in Vietnam," Nanette Norris presents an ecofeminist reading of *The Things They Carried*, exploring how Mary Anne's experience disrupts a unified masculine war narrative. The most extensive eco-critical study is Rosalind Poppleton-Pritchard's 2000 dissertation *A Crisis 'in country': An Ecocritical Approach to Tim O'Brien's Fiction*, which reflects on the ecological impact of American military rhetoric and considers the environmental movement's impact on O'Brien's works.

[1] James M. Cochran, Hartwick College, Oneonta, New York, United States. Email: cochranj@hartwick.edu.

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Few critics, however, have combined ecological and trauma readings of O'Brien's novel. One critic who does read *The Things They Carried* from an ecocritical lens is Brian Jarvis (2008). Jarvis (2008) frames his study as investigating trauma and ecological space: " 'Trauma' and 'space' have each been the site of an exciting inter-disciplinary convergence involving literary and film studies, history and cultural geography, psychoanalysis and feminism. At the same time, and somewhat surprisingly, there has been relatively little exploration of the intersections *between* trauma and space" (p. 134). In his "Skating on a Shit Field: Tim O'Brien and the Topography of Trauma," Jarvis (2008) explores this intersection between trauma and topography through close readings of Vietnam's landscape in *The Things They Carried.*

To center the ecological as a critical feature in O'Brien's novel, this essay adopts Tina Amorok's (2007) concepts of eco-Being, eco-trauma of Being, and eco-recovery of Being as a guiding framework. I propose the adoption of Amorok's concepts as a literary hermeneutic because it provides a theoretical model that positions ecological damage as central to wartime trauma. Presently, few critics have used Amorok's terms, and the application of Amorok's terms has been limited to film studies, particularly Anil Narine's 2014 edited collection *Eco-Trauma Cinema* and Robin L. Murray and Joseph K. Heumann's 2016 book *Monstrous Nature*. Even these scholars, however, only make a passing mention to Amorok's theory of eco-Being. This essay argues for a more comprehensive adoption and extrapolation of Amorork's framework as a methodological tool for examining the intersection between trauma and ecology.

To demonstrate the effectiveness of Amorok's framework, the following essay reads Tim O'Brien's 1990 novel *The Things They Carried* alongside Amorok's eco-Being, eco-trauma, and eco-recovery. Reading O'Brien's text through Amorok's model is particularly productive because almost no critics investigate the ecocritical dimensions of O'Brien's novel.[2] Yet, despite the absence of green scholarship surrounding O'Brien's novel, Amorok's framework, as I will show, draws attention to the environmental costs of war as depicted in O'Brien's novel. Applying Amorok's model as an ecocritical lens to *The Things They Carried* demonstrates how we can use Amorok's tripartite structure to further unpack the ecological dimensions of fiction that seemingly have little to do with the environment. Simply put, Amorok's model as a literary framework reminds us that all texts are ecological texts—even if they are not intentionally environmental treatises or explicitly about environments because all texts show various relationships between humans, environments, non-human beings, and other organisms. Amorok's framework allows literary critics to recognize the way that texts are already ecological, already embedded in the ecological world, created out of the ecological world, and describe attitudes toward the ecological world. Amorok's framework shows us what Mark Scholl (2012) describes in his definition of ecohumanism: "Ecohumanism is offered up as a this-worldly construct that contextualizes the human experience as nested in multiple layers of our ecological being, located as we are in language, cultural, and biotic communities. Ecohumanism is defined as a way of viewing human beings as embedded in chronological, social, and biological ecological contexts where they develop in time, as social beings, and as part of the natural world" (p. 202). Amorok's framework calls attention to the

[2] Rosalind Poppleton-Pritchard is the most comprehensive ecocritic of *The Things They Carried*. See her 1997 article and 2000 dissertation. See also Nanette Norris for an ecofeminist reading and Brian Jarvis for a topographical reading of the novel.

embeddedness of literary texts—and of human experience—asking us to locate the ecological as central to the meaning of the text.

My article thus follows Jarvis's attempt to combine trauma theory and ecocriticism, but, relying heavily on psychologist Tina Amorok's concepts of eco-Being, eco-trauma of Being, and eco-recovery of Being, I explore the ways in which O'Brien's characters remain traumatically separated from and attempt to regain interconnection with the ecological world. Ultimately, in O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, characters use war and psychological constructs to remain isolated from nature, and O'Brien, the character, attempts to recover his eco-Being through an intergenerational commune with Vietnam's ecological world.[3] The purpose of this essay is twofold: Specifically, in regards to *The Things They Carried*, this essay unpacks the way that wartime trauma and recovery coincide with eco-trauma and recovery. More broadly, my reading of O'Brien's novel offers one example of how literary critics can adopt Amorok's framework to locate the ecological features of seemingly non-ecological texts.

## Overview of Amorok's Ecological Framework

Before looking at O'Brien's novel, however, I will first define terms borrowed from Amorok's study. The first concept, "eco-Being," locates the "Earth and the cosmos" as a part of our "fundamental nature" (Amorok, 2007, p. 29). In Amorok's framework, humans are fundamentally related and interconnected to the earth, and the acknowledgment of this relationship renews humans' psychological and spiritual selves. According to Amorok (2007), "The experience of numinosity and kinship with *everything* is meant to be a part of our everyday lives. Humans are born with an animistic sense of the world, an ability to perceive the soul in nature" (p. 29). Eco-Being represents an existence that recognizes and actively participates in the interconnection of animals, humans, and the environment. Eco-Being represents an ecohumanist concept that imagines humans within a larger network with living and nonliving human beings and environments.

Second, the "eco-trauma of Being" refers to the "traumatic loss of intimacy with the Earth and the cosmos" (Amorok, 2007, p. 29). In this worldview, humans are tied to the so-called natural world; yet, recent societies have rejected the natural relationship (Amorok, 2007, p. 29). Not only do humans rupture their relationship with the earth through their actions, but humans, especially in Western societies, construct psychological and ideological boundaries that separate themselves from the ecological and non-human. Amorok's eco-trauma refers to the environment's destructed and polluted state, but eco-trauma also refers to a deep sense of loss within the human psyche. Furthermore, Amorok (2007) warns that eco-trauma is intergenerational: each generation, intentionally and unintentionally, teaches their children ideologies and practices that perpetuate violence towards each other, animals, and nature (p. 30).

[3] I use "nature" and the "ecological" interchangeably throughout this essay. While "ecological" is my preferred term, I also use "nature" because it is the term that Amorok uses in her framework. Still, I recognize the limits of using a term like "nature," given the work of Timothy Morton (2009) and others who have deconstructed the term "nature" and cautioned us to avoid thinking of "nature" as something "out there" (77).

Finally, the "eco-recovery of Being" requires an ethic of care and a reverence to the ecological world: "We long to live in a harmony with what is, to belong and feel beloved upon the Earth. This is our natural state" (Amorok, 2007, p. 37). To restore our individual and communal selves and recover from eco-trauma, Amorok's model identifies both "shared" and "direct" practices of ecological engagement. Amorok stresses that these eco-recovery practices are not solitary acts but should be practiced in intergenerational communities because eco-trauma is inherently intergenerational (Amorok, 2007, p. 31).

## Eco-Being

Having briefly explained Amorok's overall framework in the previous section, I will now model how literary critics can adopt Amorok's framework as a hermeneutic through a reading of *The Things They Carried*. Using Amorok's terms as guides helps to center the ecological in O'Brien's novel. Just as Amorok will help unpack the ecological in O'Brien's novel, the novel itself will also provide room for exploring specific features of Amorok's terms. First, I turn to Amorok's concept of eco-Being, which, as I have already explained, refers to the fundamental connection between humanity and "nature." In *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien gives us glimpses of sacred interconnectedness between humans and the "natural" world. In particular, in "On the Rainy River," Elroy Berdahl and the Tip Top Lodge are intricately connected with the ecological realm, exemplifying Amorok's eco-Being. O'Brien establishes the Tip Top Lodge as an environmental space, distinct from an anthropocentric society. The land "was mostly wilderness," (45) and "Tourist season was over, and there were no boats on the river….All around us, there was a vastness to the world, an unpeopled rawness, just the trees and the sky and the water reaching out toward nowhere" (53). Confused and frustrated with a war-centered society, the character O'Brien retreats to an "unpeopled" wilderness for renewal, guidance, and ultimately escape.

Elroy, too, serves as an ecological figure, one who lives intimately with and resembles the natural world. In another fictional retelling of his Rainy River experience, O'Brien refers to Elroy as a person who "was dressed all in, all in brown, you know, the kind of north woods look—brown shirt and brown pants—brown everything" ("Writing Vietnam").[4] The brown of Elroy's clothing points to the brown of the "north woods." For Elroy, the environmental world is full of spiritual power. O'Brien writes, "One evening, just before sunset, he [Elroy] pointed up at a small owl circling over the violet-lighted forest to the west. 'Hey, O'Brien,' he said. 'There's Jesus' (47). Elroy's words are cryptic, and his specific meaning is perhaps unclear, but he clearly recognizes the divine characteristics of the ecological and non-human world. For Elroy, the ecological is sacred: Whether the owl represents Jesus or the forest represents where Jesus is, the non-human world carries divine significance according to Elroy's cryptic comment.

[4] "Writing Vietnam" is a lecture that O'Brien gives; yet, O'Brien, the writer, still adopts a fictional persona that largely corresponds with the fictional account presented in *The Things They Carried*. At the end of the lecture, after telling the war as nonfiction, he admits that it is fiction: "The second reason I told you this story is that none of it's true. Or very little of it. It's - invented. No Elroy, no Tip-Top Lodge, no pig factory, I'm trying to think of what else. I've never been to the Rainy River in my life. Uh, not even close to it. I haven't been within two hundred miles of the place. No boats. But, although the story I invented, it's still true, which is what fiction is all about. Uh, if I were to tell you the literal truth of what happened to me in the summer of nineteen sixty-eight, all I could tell you was that I played golf, and I worried about getting drafted. But that's a crappy story. Isn't it?"

A significant feature of Amorok's eco-Being is the way that humans need to be present with and encounter the ecological world through silence, listening, and attention. Amorok (2007) argues, "To begin healing what is broken in ourselves and in our relations to the natural world, we need to see and feel what is within us and all around us" (p. 74). When we read O'Brien's novel with Amorok's emphasis on attention, we discover that Elroy, too, understands the central role of silence for connecting to the ecological world. Elroy is a "silent, watchful presence" (46), who often blends in with the ecological landscape: "He didn't speak. He was simply there, like the river and the late-summer sun" (57). Elroy finds value in listening to the character of O'Brien and the ecological world rather than offering politically-charged advice about patriotism and the Vietnam war—exactly the kind of rhetoric from which O'Brien flees.

Despite O'Brien's retreat into the natural world of the Tip Top Lodge, Elroy, and the Rainy River, his experience on the river is a threatening and nearly destructive moment. The river offers O'Brien the possibility of escaping to Canada, but suddenly, O'Brien feels overwhelmed and unable to escape:

> Everywhere, it seemed, in the trees and water and sky, a great worldwide sadness came pressing down on me, a crushing sorrow, sorrow like I had never known it before….Bobbing there on the Rainy River, looking back at the Minnesota shore, I felt a sudden swell of helplessness come over me, a drowning sensation as if I had toppled overboard and was being swept away by the silver waves. Chunks of my own history flashed by. (54-55)

O'Brien compares his "crushing sorrow" to drowning on the Rainy River, seemingly distancing himself from the ecological world, but what "drowns" O'Brien is not the actual "silver waves" of the Rainy River but a history of ideological and psychological constructions. He imagines his family, people from his town, figures from American and Western history and literature, and "a million ferocious citizens waving flags of all shapes and colors" (56). Rather than almost drowning in the river, as a part of the ecological world, O'Brien almost drowns in, what Jefferson Cowie and Lauren Boehm (1998) call, the "phantasmagoria of Americana" (p. 35). It is the human-centered world of war and political rhetoric, not the ecological world of the Rainy River, that drowns O'Brien. Crushed under the fear that the dominant society would conceive of him as a coward, O'Brien returns to the United States and deploys to Vietnam.

Alternatively, Poppleton-Pritchard (1997) suggests that, on the Rainy River, O'Brien envisions a final escape from American ideology: "America drowns and the [ecological] world survives" (p. 154). O'Brien retreats to the ecological world for support, guidance, and escape; however, his inherited cultural beliefs pull him away from the river. America's drowning is temporary, and "the crowd he describes becomes hostile and eventually conforms to their commands. The binding strength of the west's conceptual framework of values, beliefs and assumptions is acknowledged and conformed to" (Poppleton-Pritchard, *A Crisis "in Country,"* p. 54). Ultimately, O'Brien's attempt to commune with nature fails, but his attempt still demonstrates a potential eco-Being, an unfulfilled desire for relationship with the ecological world.

Later in the novel, even during the war, the character O'Brien recognizes the spiritual power of the ecological realm, as well as his connection to the land. According to O'Brien, a closeness to death results in a deep appreciation of life. He writes, "But then for a few seconds

everything goes quiet and you look up and see the sun and a few puffy white clouds, and the immense serenity flashes against your eyeballs" (34). Later, he continues,

> At the hour of dusk you sit at your foxhole and look out on a wide river turning pinkish red, and at the mountains beyond, and although in the morning you must cross the river and go to the mountains and do terrible things and maybe die, even so, you find yourself studying the fine colors on the river, you feel the wonder and awe at the setting of the sun, and you are filled with a hard, aching love for how the world could be and always should be, but now is not. (78)

He focuses his attention on the serenity of the sky and the colors of the river. With the ugliness of war around him, O'Brien appreciates the immensity of the natural world and longs for a world that "could be and always should be." O'Brien's longing for a new world hints at his potential eco-recovery, a move away from eco-trauma and toward a renewed eco-Being.

## Eco-Trauma

The next feature of Amorok's model is eco-trauma. We have the potential for a positive relationship with the ecological world, but our ideological constructions and actions often result in trauma instead. Amorok suggests that humans' destructive tendencies toward the environment stem from a fear and anxiety about death. Our sense of interconnection with everything results in a sense of "pandemic of human violence and the existential anxiety that it causes" (Amorok, 2007, p. 29). Amorok (2007) continues, "We defend ourselves from this fearsome side of interconnectedness through separation ideologies and practices (war, religious fanaticism, racism, and sexism), psychological defense mechanisms (denial, dissociation, psychic numbing), and an array of debilitating behaviors and responses that bear the signature of trauma, ranging from depression, anxiety, and addictive lifestyles to violence toward self, others, and nature" (p. 29). Put another way, psychiatrist and trauma theorist Robert Jay Lifton (1995), borrowing from Freud's terminology, relates death anxiety with the infamous My Lai massacre in Vietnam: "The false witness at My Lai was a suppression or numbing towards certain elements of death, and the way that that happened was by converting very quickly, almost immediately, one's own death anxiety into killing" (p. 139). Lifton (1995) is concerned with a "perverse quest for meaning" in which soldiers kill their enemies to assert their control over death (p. 138), but we can expand Lifton's focus to the ecological realm: Soldiers wage environmental warfare to assert their power and control through the destruction of an ecological enemy.

In O'Brien's narrative, characters attack nonhuman animals in an attempt to establish and assert their power. For example, after one of O'Brien's fellow soldiers Ted Lavender dies, the American soldiers attack a village, destroying not only material objects but also killing animals: "Jimmy Cross led his men into the village of Than Khe. They burned everything. They shot chickens and dogs, they trashed the village well, they carried in artillery and watched the wreckage" (15). The attacks center on animal enemies as much as, if not more than, human enemies. O'Brien's focus in this passage is one the ecological world: he only specifically names the attacks on the chickens and dogs, not on humans. The soldiers senselessly "burn everything" to avenge Lavender's death.

A more explicit example of O'Brien's characters converting their death anxiety and using violence to assert control over death is Rat Kiley's infamous murder of the baby water buffalo. After Curt Lemon dies, Rat Kiley slowly and intimately shoots the water buffalo:

> He [Rat] stepped back and shot it through the right front knee. The animal did not make a sound. It went down hard, then got up again, and Rat took careful aim and shot off an ear. He shot it twice in the flanks. It wasn't to kill; it was to hurt. He put the rifle muzzle up against the mouth and shot the mouth away. Nobody said much. The whole platoon stood there watching, feeling all kinds of things, but there wasn't a great deal of pity for the baby water buffalo. Curt Lemon was dead. Rat Kiley had lost his best friend in the world. (75).

Earlier in the novel, O'Brien demonstrates the soldiers' disregard for animal life when Azar, as a prank, "strapped the puppy to a Claymore antipersonnel mine and squeezed the firing device…[and] blew away Ted Lavender's puppy" (35). Azar's inhumane attack on the puppy reveals the effects of boredom, but, in this passage, O'Brien links Rat's violent mutilation of the buffalo directly to Lemon's death. To numb himself from Lemon's death and assert his own life, Rat designates the water buffalo as an object to hurt and eventually kill.

## Eco-Trauma and Nightmares

The destructive actions of eco-trauma harm the environment, but the ecological realm is not the only victim. Amorok (2007) suggests that humans wounded even as we would the earth and cosmos: "Through the lens of trauma, we can understand how both the perpetrators and victims of violence suffer the same wounding" (p. 31). Amorok's concept of eco-trauma reminds us that humans, as well as the non-human world, suffer because of our destructive actions toward the ecological world. Applying Amorok's terms to O'Brien's novel, we see his characters having recurring nightmares related to their ecological violence. For example, O'Brien experiences nightmarish flashbacks to Vietnam combat: "The bad stuff never stop happening: it lives in its own dimension, replaying itself over and over" (31). The traumatic experience of the Vietnam haunt O'Brien, constantly replaying in flashbacks, and, while O'Brien does not specifically name ecological violence as "the bad stuff," we know that attacks on chickens, dogs, and water buffalos are a part of his Vietnam experience.

Still, O'Brien has other nightmares that are related to violence toward animals. Specifically, O'Brien's job in a meatpacking factory before the war prompts nightmarish visions. He was unable to wash away the "greasy pig-stink," preventing him from "getting dates that summer" and causing him to feel "isolated" (41). In another version of the story of his summer in the meatpacking factory, O'Brien emphasizes the way in which the slaughter haunts him: "My dreams, obviously, were dreams of slaughter that summer—blood dreams" ("Writing Vietnam"). For O'Brien, slaughtering pigs is not an activity that he can quickly forget; instead, this mutilation of nonhuman animal remains with him. O'Brien's experience in the meatpacking factory demonstrates the way in which eco-trauma contributes to psychological hauntings.

## Anxiety of Interconnection and Ideologies of Separation

According to Amorok (2007), in Western history, the notion that humans are interconnected with and a part of the natural world has caused and continues to cause anxiety and fear for

the human psyche. I again quote a previously-quoted passage from Amorok (2007) because of its significance: "We defend ourselves from this fearsome side of interconnectedness through separation ideologies and practices (war, religious fanaticism, racism, and sexism), psychological defense mechanisms" (p. 29). Although the binary between nature and society goes beyond the American experience, Puritan mythology, which many still regard as a foundational element of contemporary American identity, relies on this binary between the so-called natural world and the human world. According to Michael Lewis (2007), "The Puritans who established the Massachusetts Bay colony were particularly concerned about the possibility of becoming wild in the American wilderness. Only a thin veneer separated humans from beasts, they believed, and one must remain ever vigilant to avoid letting the inner beast take over" (p. 28). The "City on a Hill" stands in direct contrast to the chaotic and threatening American landscape, an ecological space previously inhabited by irreligious and pagan savages. Today, the Puritan fear of the evil wilderness still impacts American cultural attitudes toward the environment.

A haunting way that humans defend themselves via "separation ideologies and practices" is by projecting notions of evil onto the environment (Amorok, 2007, p. 29). That is, humans invent ways to separate themselves from the non-human, ecological world in order to avoid the truth of interconnection with the ecological world. Amorok's concept of eco-trauma here recalls Simon Estok's (2012) concept of ecophobia: "an irrational and groundless fear or hatred of the natural world….Ecophobia is all about fear of a loss of agency and control in Nature" (p. 112). Ecophobia feeds into itself: Humans unleash, in Amorok's words, their "great storehouses of shadows" onto the ecological world, and, as a result, they see the ecological world as a dangerous place, a place to be feared or hated.

Such an understanding of the anxiety around interconnection and the construction of separation is found clearly in *The Things They Carried*. Early in O'Brien's text, the Rainy River represents a valuable spiritual space where O'Brien retreats, but, during the war, the environmental world becomes a threatening space. The American soldiers, unleashing their "great storehouses of shadow[s]," construct Vietnam's ecological realm as dark, dangerous, and threatening.

For O'Brien and other American soldiers in the novel, the Vietnamese landscape is a fearful space, full of ghosts and dangerous forces. Curt Lemon's death exemplifies one of many examples of the constructed fear of the ecological. Describing Curt Lemon's death by booby trap, O'Brien writes, "The sunlight came around him and lifted him up and sucked him high into a tree full of moss and vines and white blossoms" (67). The sun becomes a deadly force. O'Brien recalls that Lemon "must've thought it was the sunlight that was killing him. It was not the sunlight. It was a rigged 105 round" (80). O'Brien admits that the booby trap killed Lemon, but he imagines that Lemon must have placed the blame on the sunlight.According to Poppleton-Pritchard (2000), Lemon's belief that the sunlight killed him is an example of the "planet fighting back" or one of the ways in which "O'Brien portrays the destructive power of nature" (*A Crisis "in Country"* 151). Certainly, O'Brien portrays the ecological world's destructive capacity; however, I disagree that Lemon's death is an example of the "planet fighting back." Instead, guided by Amorok's framework, I suggest O'Brien's description of Lemon's death reveals one of the ways in which individuals, projecting their shadows, construct the ecological as wholly dangerous. In reality, the "rigged 105 round" kills Lemon,

but for Lemon, the sun as assassin was the "final truth" because of his preconceived understanding of Vietnam's environmental realm as deadly.

In addition to the deadly sunlight, the Vietnamese landscape is also filled with ghosts. The soldiers construct and perpetuate the belief that the natural world is threatening through the myth of Charlie Cong, the "main ghost" who "could blend with the land, changing form, becoming trees and grass" (193). In the same way that Amorok suggests that humans project their shadows onto the ecological world, the American soldiers see the natural world as dangerous because of the shapeshifting Charlie Cong. According to Timothy Melley (2012), O'Brien's Charlie Cong myth serves as an outlet for fear: "In the Western imagination, Vietnam becomes a Rorschach test onto which its would-be conquerors project their terror" (p. 137). By conceiving of Charlie Cong as one who can appear, disappear, change form, and become a part of the flora, the American soldiers imbue the natural world with destructive power. Charlie Cong is potentially always present in the flora, and thus, the flora is always a source of fear.

O'Brien is not the only character who constructs the ecological world as a dangerous place. Another American soldier, Mitchell Sanders, tells a story about the jungle's mysterious music:

> And man, I'll tell you—it's spooky. This is mountains. You don't *know* spooky till you been there….And the sounds, man. The sounds carry forever. You hear stuff nobody should hear….So after a couple days the guys start hearing this real soft, kind of wacked-out music. Weird echoes and stuff. Like a radio or something, but it's not a radio, it's this strange gook music that comes right out of the rocks. Faraway, sort of, but right up close too. (69)

Sanders's story captures two main fears about the ecological world. The first is the fear that results from projecting, in Amorok's phrase, "great storehouses of shadow." The men project their fears onto the wilderness and turn the landscape into the enemy. In Sander's story, the ecological begins to talk: "The rock—its *talking*. And the fog, too, and the grass and the goddam mongooses. Everything talks. The trees talk politics, the monkey talks religion" (71). The men, transforming the wilderness into the enemy, imbue the ecological world with human agency.

Now, having shown how O'Brien's characters construct the environment as dangerous, this essay turns to how, in a related way, the novel's characters destroy the Vietnamese animals and landscape. The establishment of the "wilderness" as dangerous and threatening justifies and legitimates the use of environmental warfare. In war, the ecological becomes defined by use-value, and if the military determines that enemies can harness the terrain, then ecological warfare is necessary for American security. Sanders continues,

> They call in air strikes. And I'll tell you, they fuckin' crash that cocktail party. All night long, they just smoke those mountains. They make jungle juice. They blow away trees and glee clubs and whatever else there is to blow away. Scorch time. They walk napalm up and down the ridges. They bring in the Cobras and F-4s, they use Willie Peter and HE and incendiaries. It's all fires. They make those mountains burn. (71)

To smoke out the "gook cocktail party," the American soldiers attack mountains, jungle, and ridges, the terrain of potential enemies. The soldiers feel that they are justified in making the "mountains burn" because the ecological, through the mountains, trees, and rocks, is a part of the enemy forces.

Underlying the fear of the "evil" ecological word is a fear that the human world is indistinct from the ecological and animal world. This second type of fear, that the human and the ecological words are not so distinct, creeps into Sanders's story. The jungle starts to sound "like, this big swank gook cocktail party somewhere out there in the fog. Music and chitchat and stuff. It's crazy but they hear the champagne corks. They hear the actual martini glasses. Real hoity-toity, all very civilized except this isn't civilization. This is Nam" (71). The soldiers fear that the wilderness, a place supposedly distinct from rational civilization, is actually similar to human society. Furthermore, the soldiers' mad attack against the mountains hints at the barbaric underside of "civilized" soldiers. Like Rat's attack against the buffalo, which Poppleton-Pritchard (1997) describes as an example of "the animal within the human psyche, a breakdown of the dualism between humankind and the natural world," the soldiers' mad attack against the wilderness reveals their irrational core (p. 82). The wilderness becomes a "hoity-toity" place, and the men, full of fear and passion, become irrational "animals." Sander's story reinforces the "dangers" of blurring the boundaries between the human and ecological world.

## The Constructed Danger of Ecological Integration

In Amorok's ecological outlook, the ideal experience is one of ecological integration, a moment in which humans become intimately connected to the natural world; however, as a part of the collective eco-trauma of Being, humans often refuse to directly engage with the environment in a selfless and relational way. Instead, people construct ecological integration as a dangerous experience that ultimately results in a loss of self. The character O'Brien often frames ecological integration as potentially dangerous: three specific examples stand out in the novel. First, the death of Curt Lemon, which I previously discussed, illustrates the dangerous and specifically deadly consequences of ecological integration. When the booby trap blows Lemon apart, pieces of what is left of him become fixed onto the surrounding trees. The explosion sucks "him high into a tree full of moss and vines and white blossoms" (67). Later, O'Brien recalls, "The parts were just hanging there so Dave Jensen and I were ordered to shinny up and peel him off. I remember the white bone of an arm….But what wakes me up twenty years later is Dave Jensen singing "Lemon Tree" as we threw down the parts" (79). Jensen's song reinforces the idea that Lemon is integrated with the tree, becoming a lemon tree. Moreover, the ecological integration results in the loss of self through Lemon's death.

Another moment in which ecological integration results in a destructive loss of self is when O'Brien, in an act of revenge, plays a cruel prank on Bobby Jorgenson, the new medic who failed to properly dress O'Brien's wound. After hiding in the dark and making loud noises while Jorgenson is on night patrol, O'Brien becomes a part of the landscape. He asserts, "I was part of the night. I was the land itself—everything, everywhere—the fireflies and paddies, the midnight rustlings, the cool phosphorescent shimmer of evil—I was atrocity—I was jungle" (199). O'Brien becomes a part of the "land itself," but unlike ecological integration in eco-recovery, O'Brien's integration is tainted with negativity. He uses the land to terrify

Jorgenson, and he conceives of the ecological world as only a negative space, a force that is evil and haunting.

Third and most critically, Rat Kiley's story about Mary Anne provides a detailed example of how ecological integration results in the destructive loss of self. Mary Anne, who initially seems to be a "typical" American woman, is interested in and becomes a part of the Vietnamese wilderness. According to Jarvis (2008), O'Brien constructs Mary Anne as an "All-American girl" through her "white legs," "blue eyes," "complexion like strawberry ice cream" links (p. 138). Moreover, Rat Kiley emphasizing Mary Anne's "All-American girl" qualities links her to American civilian society: "This cute blonde—just a kid, just barely out of high school….I swear to God, man, she's got on culottes. White culottes and this sexy pink sweater" (86). The focus on Mary Anne's "white culottes" is not simply a passing comment; rather, her clothing suggests that she, as a "typical" civilian, engages in the latest American fashions. American Historian Troy D. Paino (2008) explains, "By 1965, miniskirts, gogo boots, and culotte dresses dominated U.S. fashion" (p. 195). Thus, through colors and clothing, O'Brien establishes Mary Anne as an all-American civilian girl.

However, in Vietnam, Mary Anne quickly strips her "all-American girl" identity. In particular, the wilderness entices Mary Anne and transforms her. O'Brien writes, "The war intrigued her. The land, too, and the mystery" (91). Mary Anne loses interest in social interaction, and "Mary Anne just stared out at the dark green mountains to the west. The wilderness seemed to draw her in" (100). Mary Anne exclaims, "Sometimes I want to *eat* this place. The whole country—the dirt, the death—I just want to swallow it and have it there inside me. That's how I feel. It's like this appetite" (106). The wilderness draws Mary Anne in and calls her to integrate herself into nature, and she also has an urge to integrate nature into herself through her consumption of "the whole country."

Mary Anne integrates herself with the natural world, but the integration is not eco-recovery; rather, in Rat's story, this ecological integration is dangerous, stripping Mary Anne of her identity—at least according to the men's story. At the end of Rat's tale, Mary Anne disappears "into the mountains and did not come back. No body was ever found. No equipment, no clothing. For all he knew, Rat said, the girl was still alive" (110). Mary Anne's physical self disappears, and she becomes a part of Vietnam's haunted landscape: "Mary Anne was still somewhere out there in the dark. Odd movements, odd shapes….She was dangerous. She was ready for the kill" (110). Like O'Brien's ecological integration, Mary Anne's integration is plagued by negativity and danger. In addition to losing her physical self, her "integrated self" is threatening. Like Charlie Cong, she is able to appear, disappear, and shapeshift, features that help to construct her as an ever-present ecological danger.

## Eco-Recovery of Being

Up until this point, this essay has looked at O'Brien's novel through Amorok's terms of eco-Being and eco-trauma. O'Brien's novel offers glimpses of eco-Being through Elroy's living in the wilderness and O'Brien's overwhelming recognition of the living beings surrounding him on the Rainy River. Likewise, the novel reveals several moments of eco-trauma, from constructing the environment as dangerous to mutilating pigs and water buffalos to napalm bombing Vietnamese jungles. In the remaining pages, I now turn to two activities central to Amorok's healing model for eco-recovery: direct and shared experiences (31). In Amorok's model, these activities—direct experiences of "nature" and shared experiences in "nature"—

allow humans to re-engaged and reconnect with the ecological world in a meaningful, life-giving way.

First, the direct model centers on directly engaging with the ecological, and a subset of the direct model uses dreaming and spiritual activity. Although dreaming might seem like an indirect way to experience and engage with the ecological, dreaming represents a spiritual practice of interpreting and communing with the "natural world. Dreaming, then, as a method of recovery, moves the dreamer toward "conversation" with ancestors and the earth. Dreaming can be thought of as a spiritual activity alongside "vision quests, sweat lodges" (Amorok, 2007, p. 31). While O'Brien does not directly use dreaming to restore his eco-Being, *The Things They Carried* illustrates the importance of dreaming as a restorative practice. For example, O'Brien recalls when his childhood friend, Linda, died, and he used dreaming to keep Linda "alive." He writes, "I made up elaborate stories to bring Linda alive in my sleep. I invented my own dreams," and he later continues, "My dreams had become a secret meeting place, and in the weeks after she died I couldn't wait to fall asleep at night" (230-31). For O'Brien, dreaming keeps Linda "alive" by imagining her presence.

Besides dreaming, O'Brien conceives of storytelling as a way to remember Linda and keep her alive. Although Amorok does not explicitly link storytelling and dreaming, O'Brien does. In the final chapter of *The Things They Carried*, he writes, "The thing about a story is that you dream it as you tell it, hoping that others might then dream along with you, and in this way memory and imagination and language combine to make spirits in the head" (218). Additionally, in the chapter's concluding paragraph, O'Brien links storytelling and writing with his dreams: "And then it becomes 1990. I'm forty-three years old, and a writer now, still dreaming Linda alive in exactly the same way….I realize it is as Tim trying to save Timmy's life with a story" (232-33). Thus, O'Brien links storytelling and dreaming as common imaginative processes that have life-affirming power.

O'Brien's writing and dreaming about Linda represent a way to remember her and save "Timmy's life"; yet, this dream and story also incorporate the ecological: a frozen pond. O'Brien dreams, "So I followed her down to the frozen pond. It was late, and nobody else was there, and we held hands, and skated almost all night under the yellow lights" (232). According to Harold Bloom (2005), the frozen pond is an "invitation to self-knowledge," which "gestures toward Walden Pond, the tarn near the House of Usher, Ahab's ocean, and the swamp of the Big Two-hearted River" (p. 83). The ecological, then, offers O'Brien a form a self-knowledge and a method of self-examination. His turn inward toward himself and outward toward the frozen pond reinforces the importance of the connection between the ecological and the self, a bridge that fosters eco-recovery.

Another direct way to prompt recovery and engage the natural world is through "nature retreats." At the end of the novel, O'Brien returns to Vietnam, a solastalgic trip that Mark Heberle (2001) refers to as an attempt to put "to rest the trauma associated with the death there of a beloved comrade" (p. 31).[5] While the trip's purpose is certainly to recall Kiowa's death, Amorok's framework helps us see how O'Brien's focus extends beyond the war's human victims. He visits the "site of Kiowa's death," but he also searches "for signs of forgiveness or personal grace or whatever else the land might offer" (*The Things They Carried* 173). It is significant here that O'Brien turns his attention to the land for forgiveness.

[5] See Glenn Albrecht's (2019) concept of solastalgia, "a form of homesickness one gets when one is still at 'home' (39). Albrecht suggests that such an ecological homesickness is not permanente and could be reversed with serious restoration of the environment. In this way, we can map Albrecht's concept onto Amorok's concept of eco-recovery.

Indeed, eco-recovery for the character O'Brien involves extreme physical engagement with the ecological world—even going so far as to engage the dirtier, grimier parts of "nature." Toward the end of *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien, moving toward his eco-recovery, begins to embrace the dark and light aspects of the ecological world—although his embrace is not without difficulties. Describing earlier drafts of Kiowa's death in the "shit field," O'Brien writes, "I had been forced to omit the shit field and the rain and the death of Kiowa, replacing this material with events that better fit the book's narrative. As a consequence I'd lost the natural counterpoint between the lake and the field" (153). In early drafts, O'Brien leaves out the "shit field," an embodiment of the dark and gritty aspects of the ecological.

In response to the absence of "dark ecology," Norman Bowker urges O'Brien to restore the "shit field" to the story. Bowker writes, "It's not terrible, but you left out Vietnam. Where's Kiowa. Where's the shit?" (153). In the paragraph after Bowker's letter, O'Brien writes that Bowker hangs himself eight months later. Thus, O'Brien links the absence of the shit field to Bowker's suicide. The darkness of Kiowa's death in the shit field is necessary for Bowker's traumatic recovery, and, in my reading, his eco-recovery; recovery never occurs, however, and Bowker commits suicide. After Bowker's death, O'Brien rewrites the story of Kiowa's death and titles it "In the Field," making the ecological the centerpiece of the chapter. O'Brien writes, "The central incident—our long night in the shift field along the Song Tra Bong—has been restored to the piece. It was hard to write" (154). O'Brien restores the field to the story, revealing how the field and is dark qualities are central to his remembering of Kiowa's death.

On his trip back to Vietnam, O'Brien recognizes the complexity of the "shit field." Initially, O'Brien's trip to the "shit field" appears to idealize the once-threatening field. O'Brien begins his paragraph with an idyllic description of the field: "There were birds and butterflies, the soft rustlings of rural-anywhere" (176). The peaceful field seems to replace "all the waste that was Vietnam, all the vulgarity and horror" (176). Yet, O'Brien refuses to embrace a simple understanding of the field. He recognizes its "soft rustlings" and recalls its "vulgarity." He concludes, "Now, it was just what it was. Flat and dreary and unremarkable" (176-77). After wading in the marshland, O'Brien attempts to feel and say something deep about the act of remembering: "I tried to think of something decent to say, something meaningful and right, but nothing came to me. I looked down into the field. 'Well,' I finally managed. 'There it is' " (178).

Previously, O'Brien and other characters constructed ecological integration as a process that results in the loss of self or the transformation of a relatively stable self into a dangerous and destructive ecological self. After beginning to make attempts toward his eco-recovery of Being, O'Brien finally conceives of ecological integration as a safe and desired state. O'Brien surrenders, embracing the paradoxical nature of the ecological world (Amorok, 2007, p. 21). O'Brien underscores his surrender to the ecological world through his physical wading in the marshland. He directly swims in and engages with the materiality of the marshland. The "shit field" is neither fully sacred nor profane; the field is simply there, encompassing light and dark elements.

Furthermore, eco-recovery, like eco-trauma, is intergenerational. Amorok (2007)explains, "It is vitally important that we preserve the eco-Being within our children; this helps prepare their psyches to cope with and creatively solve the wounds to soul and land they inevitably inherit….Trauma is spread and healed in relationships, so as children heal they invariably heal

the wounds of their elders— vice versa" (p. 30). Since children often learn about the environment through their parents, ecological wounds pass from generation to generation. Because of the intergenerational aspect of trauma, children play a crucial role in the collective healing process.

O'Brien's trip back to Vietnam exemplifies how critical intergenerational action is for ecological recovery. O'Brien writes,

> The tourist stuff was fine, but from the start I'd wanted to take my daughter to the places I'd seen as a soldier. I wanted to show her the Vietnam that kept me awake at night—a shady trail outside the village of My Khe, a filthy old pigsty on the Bantangan Peninsula. Our time was short, however, and choices had to be made, and in the end I decided to take her to this piece of ground where my friend Kiowa died. It seemed appropriate. (176)

This passage is significant in light of Amorok's framework because O'Brien turns his attention to the earthly features of the country. He wants to return to the "trail," the "pigsty," and the "piece of ground." O'Brien focuses not on the architectural aspects of the country but on the environmental. This passage also reveals the start of an intergenerational project of eco-recovery. O'Brien wants his daughter to inhabit the same ecological sites that he did during the war.

## Conclusion

Using Amorok's threshold concept as lens to read Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* helps to illuminate how O'Brien's novel—and all texts—can be read as ecological. O'Brien and other characters experience trauma from witnessing the deaths of their friends and fellow soldiers, but they also experience eco-trauma because of their destructive relationship with the environment. Amorok's threefold concepts of eco-Being, eco-trauma, and eco-recovery allows us to read O'Brien as more than just a war writer. Her concepts illuminate the complexities of trauma in O'Brien's text, revealing that trauma is based in ecology, as well as in combat.

## Acknowledgements

I thank the journal editors and the anonymous reviewers for their feedback on this article. In particular, I owe a special thanks to Luke Ferretter for his critical comments on earlier drafts of this manuscript.

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