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Communicating Emotion: Identity Formation in *Native Guard* and *The Things They Carried*

“Poetry asks, it demands of us in many ways, that we slow down. That we engage with language that isn't soundbites and uncivil, language that allows us to see ourselves in the intimate experience of others. To hear the rhythms of our own heartbeats in the rhythms of someone else's intimate voice, speaking across the distances. Speaking across the lines that would divide us. Reminding us not what makes us different, but what makes us alike, what we share”

– *Natasha Trethewey*¹

The American Psychological Association defines “identity” as “an individual’s sense of self defined by (a) a set of physical, psychological, and interpersonal characteristics that is not wholly shared with any other person and (b) a range of affiliations and social roles” (“Identity”). Identity formation requires an understanding of the memories, values, and beliefs that “belong to the self” as well as a sense of “social belonging” developed through interpersonal communication (“Identity”; Assmann 115). It is common in literature for authors to reflect their personal experiences in narrative. In *The Things They Carried*, Tim O’Brien intentionally blurs the line between fiction and personal experience in order to provide insight into his personal trauma and the formation of his identity. Oppositely, in some works, the inclusion of the author’s personal experiences may have a certain purpose, but through careful analysis, one can see a

¹ "Natasha Trethewey: Poetry Speaks 'Across The Lines That Would Divide Us'." *Weekend Edition Saturday*, 3 Nov. 2018. *Gale Literature Resource Center*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A561198754/LitRC?u=uga&sid=ebsco&xid=e8c2e9a6. Accessed 17 Apr. 2022.

subconscious process of identity formation within the narrative. One such work, *Native Guard*, features Natasha Trethewey's commentary on the forgotten elements of Civil War history through interwoven narratives of historical fiction. However, Trethewey's method of connecting history and personal memory also shares similar characteristics to the pseudo-fictional storytelling of *The Things They Carried*. Like O'Brien's novel, Trethewey's collection of poetry acts as an outlet for discussing her trauma and subconsciously forms her identity.

Human existence is characterized by social interaction. Behavioral research has shown that humans are "by nature dependent on social living" (Assmann 119). The social instinct of humanity's "community-forming actions and attitudes," pushes people to look outward from themselves to try to relate to their community (119). In this way, identity is a social construct; a person's identity is influenced by the people around them and the collective history of human experience. Assmann theorizes that communication with others is the most direct experience of humanity, and that the "inner self" can only be seen through "reflection" by others (116). This definition of individual identity emphasizes the dependence of the individual on society. Assmann discusses how societies use the past "for the purpose of self-definition," and collective identity of groups is a "form of social belonging" (114, 115). In this way, individual identity is a product of both societal views of history and communication of personal experiences to others in pursuit of social acceptance and self-understanding.

Parallel research to these theories of identity has shown that communication of experiences often takes the form of narrative storytelling. The form combines all of a person's "different and fragmented identities" as they "create and construct" their life and "relations to the world in narrative structures" (Preuss 250). Humans make sense of things through storytelling. This is seen in trauma sufferers and patients with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). A

common, effective treatment that psychiatrists often recommend for PTSD is psychotherapy, an exercise in which patients talk through their trauma with a therapist or with a group of other survivors. This treatment is intended to help survivors to identify and acknowledge their emotions through controlled reliving of their experiences. Studies of psychotherapy in PTSD patients have shown that the practice of forming narratives “represents clients’ attempts to establish a sense of coherence and continuity in their lived experience” (Neimeyer 229). For patients, such continuity is an important strategy for forming a clearer vision of the self. However, the practice of psychotherapy is not limited to the psychiatrist’s office. Storytelling is also a valuable tool for writers who have experienced some sort of trauma, and oftentimes, the influence of their trauma on their works shows the correlation that psychiatrists theorize “between narrativization of trauma and the beginnings of recovery” (Farrell 187-188).

Many experts in psychology theorize that traumatic memories “do not exist in narrative time,” and that trauma sufferers often experience “intrusion,” a symptom of trauma where events “continually recur in the present rather than recede into the past” (185). Like many Vietnam veterans, Tim O’Brien suffers from trauma. In his process of healing, *The Things They Carried* serves as an outlet for him to confront his experiences and to acknowledge them as part of his past. The book is a fictional account of the lives of American soldiers in the Vietnam War. O’Brien admits that the stories are fictional, but that they are still important to understanding “what [he] felt” (171). Twenty years after serving in Vietnam, he tries to convey the emotions that he felt on the battlefield as he witnessed the incommunicable atrocities of war. He explains how, as a young man, he was often scared to look at the horrors around him. However, this fear causes him to feel “faceless grief” and ambiguity about the war, leaving him with only strong emotions and little explanation for their cause (172). His stories “make things present” as he

“put[s] sensory images into words” to create a coherent explanation of his experiences (O’Brien 172; Farrell 186). Many theorists believe that the process of narrativization or storytelling helps one to “integrate trauma into [their] life story” (Farrell 186). This is true for O’Brien, whose war stories help him to “survive the memories of Vietnam” and “bring concordance out of discordance” (Tran 231). The narrative allows him to put faces to the bodies which he knew were there and to “be brave” enough to look back into his past and relive and study a traumatic experience that scarred him (O’Brien 172).

Assmann’s theory of social belonging is evident in O’Brien’s war stories. The “communalization of trauma” requires an individual to “safely retell [a story]” through an “empathetic sharing” of experiences with one’s community (Farrell 186). The narrativization of his trauma allows him to relate to society and to combat “the isolating effects of the traumatic experience” (Farrell 189). O’Brien strives for the “reflection” of the “inner self” that Assmann describes (Assmann 116). He communicates his emotions through storytelling in the process of his identity formation in an attempt to more deeply understand himself. He uses fictional stories to give context to the reader and to convey his emotions, but that context also shows how communication of traumatic experience allows “empathy to develop” between himself and the reader (Farrell 200).

As a collection, *Native Guard* is elegiac. The book features poems that memorialize Trethewey’s mother and the Native Guard, an all Black Union army regiment that was stationed near her hometown in Gulfport, Mississippi during the Civil War. It also features poems that reference some of Trethewey’s experiences growing up as a mixed-race girl in Mississippi during the 1960s, such as the burning of a cross on the speaker’s front lawn in “Incident.” The interweaving of personal trauma and commemoration of the soldiers fosters discussion about the

lasting effects of slavery in the United States. The changing points of view from a female speaker remembering her family's struggles in the twentieth century to a Native Guard soldier describing his experiences in the height of the Civil War create "portals in a kind of poetic time travel" that allow analysis of both how the past affects the present, and also how history views the past (Ford 252). It creates a dialogue in history as the past "speaks" its "reminders of loss and death" and the present responds by "shaping and changing [the past's] meaning" (253). Trethewey emphasizes the importance of understanding the complete picture of the past in order to create a better future. She highlights this interaction between past and present, specifically through the lens of memorialization. She suggests how history and commemoration of the war in the South has "actively suppressed" the sacrifices and contributions of Black soldiers (LeMahieu 115). In writing about the Native Guard soldiers, she questions the practice of memorialization in the South and asks the question "who owns history?" (Ford 251).

On the surface level, *The Things They Carried* and *Native Guard* have similar themes about truth and memory. O'Brien's book analyzes the relationship between fiction and fact in order to show how the latter is not always the complete truth, and that fiction more accurately conveys emotion. Similarly, Trethewey comments on how history is commonly viewed in society, and how in its entirety, history is more valuable to society as a foundation for the future. O'Brien specifically notes how the relationship between fact and fiction in his book helps him to narrativize his trauma and to "make [himself] feel again" (172). Trethewey's commentary achieves a similar narrativization, although more subtly. *Native Guard* features a dichotomy between personal memory and history in order to reveal a broader human truth, but woven within the discussion are elements of Trethewey's trauma. The female speaker in the poems shares intimate details that, while not necessarily factual in Trethewey's own life, are heavily influenced

by her grief over her mother's death and the pain of facing oppression because of her race. The speaker compares an ant hill on her mother's grave to a "blister on [her] heart," and she recalls the image of Klan members on the lawn as seeming like "the angels had gathered" ("Monument" 99, "Incident" 96). These intimate details convey emotional complexity sprouting from deep-rooted trauma and pain. Trethewey makes the reader feel this pain and grief through her speaker, but the parallels to her own loss of her mother and childhood oppression suggest that these stories arise out of her own trauma. Trethewey's goal is to make a commentary about society and history, but the interaction between past and present narratives contextualizes her own experiences within American history, narrativizing the oppression of African Americans and culminating in memories of cross-burnings and her mother's death. Much like O'Brien, her poems create fictional narratives that explain her emotions, subconsciously causing her to confront the experiences that haunt her and allowing her to acknowledge her place within African American history.

Reading literature can be a therapeutic experience. Great stories teach us things about ourselves; as readers we are drawn to stories that show us the truest forms of humanity. Through storytelling, we can experience the emotions of others, giving us another point of view on the world, and quite possibly ourselves. As Assmann notes, "we are unable to see our inner self other than by reflection" (116). A great story shows us parts of ourselves that lie dormant. It reflects our "inner selves," teaching us about our individual identity as we grapple with the emotions that the author communicates to us (116). *The Things They Carried* and *Native Guard* suggest that the same is true for authors. In drawing on their own traumas, Trethewey and O'Brien undergo the same awakening as the reader. As Trethewey's book shows, that awakening may not be purposeful, but through narrativizing their trauma, the authors acknowledge their

emotions and foster their own understanding of their identity. O'Brien says that "a true war story is never moral," but the emotions of those stories can perhaps teach readers and authors more about ourselves and our identities than a clean-cut moral ever could (65).

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