

広島大学学術情報リポジトリ  
Hiroshima University Institutional Repository

Title	Tim O' Brien' s My Lai
Author(s)	Nomura, Koki
Citation	Hiroshima studies in English language and literature , 68 : 1 - 15
Issue Date	2024-03-20
DOI	
Self DOI	<a href="https://doi.org/10.15027/55130">10.15027/55130</a>
URL	<a href="https://doi.org/10.15027/55130">https://doi.org/10.15027/55130</a>
Right	著作権は、執筆者本人と広島大学英文学会に帰属するものとします。
Relation	



# Tim O'Brien's My Lai

---

Koki Nomura

---

Vietnam veteran and novelist Tim O'Brien has left works and spoken on the My Lai massacre extensively. Although his sixth novel *In the Lake of the Woods* places the incident as its primary material and critical essays on the novel have been published, a comprehensive and autobiographical discussion which concentrates on O'Brien's fixation with the incident is not found. The objective of this article is thus to inspect what the My Lai massacre means to Tim O'Brien.

In the morning of March 16, 1968, the My Lai massacre occurred in the hamlet of My Lai in Son My village, Quang Ngai Province, Viet Nam. One hundred and five men from Charlie Company under the command of Lieutenant William "Rusty" Calley gunned down 504 unarmed South Vietnamese civilians within four hours. On that day in My Lai, Charlie Company met no resistance. They were dispatched to the hamlet which was believed to have sheltered the Viet Cong (South Vietnamese supporters of North Vietnam) soldiers and their sympathizers. Since the American soldiers having experienced guerrilla warfare in Viet Nam were unable to distinguish civilians from the enemy, their rage became readily converted into racist perceptions of the Vietnamese as nonpeople. The My Lai incident was notable for its size, but there were similar incidents during the war (Lifton 235-36). Calley's psychiatric report showed that he had felt as if he were not killing human beings, because for him, the Vietnamese were "animals with whom one could not speak or reason" (Bilton and Sim 21). Over the previous few months, twenty-eight of Calley's men had been killed by booby-traps, landmines, and sniper fire. They had blamed the civilians for aiding the Viet Cong and were seeking an opportunity to take vengeance. The 504 dead civilians were old men, women (eighteen were pregnant), infants, and babies. Before and after the massacre, the men committed gang-rape, torture, and sodomy.

In March and April 1969, Tim O'Brien was among the infantry soldiers in his Alpha Company and were coincidentally sent out to secure the My Lai area, with no information of what Lt. Calley's men did there a year earlier. The area was called "Pinkville" by the American soldiers because clusters of

villages were colored pink on Army map. O'Brien's company hated to be sent out to "Pinkville" since the people were hostile there and it was one of the most heavily mined areas. Every time his company heard the word "Pinkville," they felt that someone was going to die (O'Brien, *The Vietnam* 565). Needless to say, O'Brien was neither a member of Calley's company nor did he participate in that massacre. Nevertheless, since the experiences of patrolling around the scene of the mass murder has had a major impact on O'Brien, he has written and spoken extensively on the incident. In his writing and in public, he has repeatedly admitted that what he should have done was to go to jail or to desert to Canada, as opposed to serving as a soldier in Viet Nam. This political major had opposed the war in Viet Nam, but, when he received a draft notice after the college graduation, he could not be faithful to his belief for his fears of ridicule from people in his hometown and of losing the esteem and affection of his friends.

To write *In the Lake of the Woods* (1994), a winner of the Society of American Historians Prize for Historical Fiction, O'Brien used real documents of the My Lai testimony. And the characters in the novel, except for several including its protagonist, John Wade, are real participants in the massacre. In the thirteenth chapter "The Nature of the Beast," which is a replay of the evilness of Calley's men, the fictional John Wade is given a role as the only member who is too scared to take part in the mass murder, though he witnesses its entire course behind bamboo trees. In fact, Wade attempts to stop the random shootings, only to utter a few words:

"No," he said, then after a second he said, "Please!" . . . [Varnado] Simpson was killing children. PFC Weatherby was killing whatever he could kill. A row of corpses lay in the pink-to-purple sunshine along the trail—teenagers and old women and two babies and a young boy. Most were dead, some were almost dead. The dead lay very still. The almost-dead did twitching things until PFC Weatherby had occasion to reload and make them fully dead. The noise was fierce. No one was dying quietly. There were squeakings and chicken-house sounds. (109)

Here O'Brien has fabricated the guilty character that cannot stop the evilness, therefore later in his life cannot leave the burden of grief and guilt

behind. What traumatizes Wade more is the fact that he committed two killings by mistake: he shot his comrade PFC Weatherby, who appeared out of nowhere surprising him, and also an old Vietnamese man holding a wooden hoe which Wade believed to be a rifle. John Wade, a non-violent-typed soldier, is a reminder of Tim O'Brien himself. The novelist appears to have inserted his alter ego quietly into Calley's company and imagined how he might act during the massacre. It is not surprising that this novel has been critiqued from the perspective of a common soldier's post-traumatic stress. But such reading will make this work a work of a medical or personal anguish in a world of hurt; this is beyond medical or personal. According to Harry Summers, former colonel of infantry in the Vietnam War, My Lai was "the worst disgrace that the U. S. Army has suffered, in its more than 200-year history" (257). After all, by inserting a fictional non-violent-typed soldier into the real-life group of mass murderers, O'Brien seems to have drawn a line or made a contrast between nonviolence by Wade and violence by Calley's men. The novel's setting needed to be a historical incident and it needed to be the worst kind to evoke America's moral moratorium.

O'Brien is entitled to narrating My Lai. Indeed, his Alpha Company was sent into the very hamlet one year later to help pull security when the investigation began. When they arrived, O'Brien could easily sense the remaining civilians' hostility against American troops. In my interview with O'Brien conducted in December 2019, at the O'Brien residence in Austin, Texas, I asked him his thoughts on the massacre, to which he immediately responded with bluntness and ferocity:

It was criminal and plainly immoral. No one knows exactly how many people were killed that day, but the lowest I've heard was 250 and the highest says 500. That's a lot of dead people. Especially when they are children and old men and old women. Especially because there was no gunfire. It was just murder. I remember debating with an officer—I was just a lowly sergeant. He said, "They deserved it." Some of the kids were just three years old. They deserved it? And he said, "They'd grow up and become communists and kill us." Just stupid talk like that. I remember the rage I felt. (Nomura, O'Brien 20)

The officer being referred to here is Captain Ernest Medina, the well-known commanding officer of Calley's men who was in charge of escorting reporters and investigators to the site of the massacre. Later, in America, Medina was court martialed for his role in the massacre but soon acquitted. O'Brien had served as a clerk under the very man. What is keeping O'Brien's conscience alive and holding him true to My Lai must be this rage that he has held to this day against Calley's men and Medina.

Equally infamous as the massacre was the cover-up of the massacre perpetrated by the brigade and division staffs. The Army took no action against Calley's men at that time. In April 1969, Vietnam veteran Ronald Ridenhour brought the incident to light in letters to the Pentagon, the White House, and members of Congress. The Army had no choice but to court martial twenty-six officers and enlisted soldiers, and those men were prosecuted and found guilty of the murder of South Vietnamese civilians. Yet, those men were either acquitted or pardoned later by President Richard Nixon. Lt. Calley was the single person who served prison time and he served only four and a half months. Seventy-nine percent of the Americans disapproved of Calley's conviction, and the majority believed Calley to be a scapegoat, according to Gallop Poll conducted in 1971 (*New York Times*). O'Brien now feels "betrayed by a nation that so widely shrugs off barbarity, by a military judicial system that treats murders and common soldiers as one and the same. Apparently, we're all innocent—those who exercise moral restraint and those who do not, officers who control their troops and officers who do not. In a way, America has declared *itself* innocent" ("The Vietnam" 53). For instance, Varnado Simpson and Tim O'Brien are equally innocent, according to American military judicial system. Simpson testified that he killed twenty-five civilians. Simpson was one of those twenty-five former soldiers who were never convicted and was one of the "murderers" whom O'Brien has called out and accused in public frequently. In 1992, Simpson confessed to historians Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim: "How can you forgive? I can't forgive myself for the things—even though I know that it was something that I was told to do. But how can I forget that—or forgive? It's easy for you to say: Well, you go back ahead with your life. But how can you go ahead with your life when this is holding you back? I can't put my mind to anything. . . . Yes, I'm ashamed, I'm sorry, I'm guilty. But I did it. You know. What else can I tell you? It happened"

(378).

In 1977, Simpson's son was the target of a random shooting committed by teenagers in his neighborhood. He died from his wounds. Furthermore, his daughter died of meningitis several years later. Simpson considered these incidents as the punishment for his actions in My Lai. In 1982, Simpson was diagnosed with chronic and severe post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). For years he had been obsessed with an idea of the dead Vietnamese civilians revisiting him to take vengeance, so he chose to live with all his doors and windows locked. In 1997, he died after shooting himself in the head in his home. The man with a sense of guilt convicted himself and took his own life while many others probably have done their best to forget what they did. O'Brien assumes that those "innocent" men would wish *In the Lake of the Woods* were not published and would wish the whole thing would go away and be forgotten. O'Brien's rage is now being fused with deep disillusionment, and condemnation against the verdict of the massacre and against the self-deception of Calley's men and the American public.

It is not that O'Brien cannot understand the frustrations and anger that Calley's men had gone through. O'Brien's company did go through the same frustrations and anger. In the guerilla warfare in Viet Nam, there were no battle lines and many of the casualties that American infantry soldiers took were from landmines, which amassed their frustrations because landmines were an enemy that could not be shot back at. In May 1969, in the hamlet near My Lai, O'Brien's best friend in Viet Nam, Alvin "Chip" Merricks, stepped on a landmine and was blown into bamboo trees. In the same month, O'Brien was slightly wounded by shrapnel from a hand grenade also near My Lai. Vietnamese villagers generally let American troops walk into minefields and ambushes without giving them any warning because it was believed that the villagers were threatened by guerilla soldiers in the area not to give any information to the American soldiers. In that way, their life had been suffocated between two perilous groups of men. In "My Lai in May," the thirteenth chapter of his first book (memoir), *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* (1973), O'Brien writes that when O'Brien's company lost "their two popular soldiers" to a booby-trapped artillery round one day, "men put their fists into the faces of the nearest Vietnamese, two frightened women living in the guilty hamlet, and when the troops were through with them, they

hacked off chunks of thick black hair. The men were crying, doing this. An officer used his pistol, hammering it against a prisoner's skull" (119). However, O'Brien also makes it clear to the public in "The Vietnam in Me" (1994), a painful report-confession on his 1994 revisit to Viet Nam, that anyone in his Alpha Company had neither turned their machine guns on civilians nor "cross[ed] that conspicuous line between rage and homicide" (53). Calley's company had no morality while O'Brien's company had something O'Brien calls a "moral gyroscope." Morality and sanity were probably the only certain things for the infantry soldiers to hold onto in the field of uncertainty.

O'Brien has been consistent with his statement that his company never crossed the line between rage and homicide. That said, he denounces his former comrades' racism against Vietnamese and apathy toward the dead Vietnamese people and their families. In "War Buddies," the forty-third chapter in his nonfiction on parenting and war-related topics *Dad's Maybe Book* (2019), O'Brien writes,

I fear that a dangerous egocentrism—a kind of selfishness, a kind of narcissism—had blinded many Vietnam veterans to what the war did to *other* people. . . . Among my fellow veterans I almost never hear expressions of pity for the orphans and widows and grieving mothers of Vietnam; in fact, I rarely hear the word "Vietnamese" at all. . . . What about the sacrifices of the Vietnamese? . . . I'm applauded. . . . One man's pride is another man's sorrow. One man's service to country is another man's dead son. (266)

So, O'Brien has strong criticism not only over Calley's men but also over his former comrades. In sum, to Tim O'Brien, My Lai means evilness, legal innocence, lack of morality and sanity, racism against Vietnamese, and apathy toward the dead Vietnamese. In return they have brought him rage, guilt, disillusionment, and criticism over the self-deception of Calley's men and the American public. This is O'Brien's My Lai as a trauma in American history—his agony caused by somebody else's wrongdoing.

Then the reader may wonder: Doesn't O'Brien have his *own* My Lai, a *personal* trauma of atrocity that has haunted him? Writing has helped O'Brien survive through his post-war years, but that does not necessarily mean that he

has no war-related stress. During his revisit to My Lai in February 1994, O'Brien had conversations with two female Vietnamese survivors of My Lai. One woman explained to him through his interpreter about the moments during the random shooting when Calley's men pushed her and many others into a ditch and started shooting at them. The woman survived because she was lying under bodies of the dead. Three of her four children were shot to death. The other woman had pretended to be dead lying beneath other dead bodies as well. O'Brien was already "exhausted" when the first woman finished talking. When the second woman started confessing her story to him, he recalls: "I could barely wire myself together" partly because of "the sheer magnitude of horror, partly some hateful memories of my own" ("The Vietnam" 53). In the end, however, O'Brien reaches one conclusion: "For too many years I've lived in paralysis—guilt, depression, terror, shame—and now it's either move or die. . . . But at least the limbo has ended" (56). It can be said that O'Brien's encounter with the My Lai survivors presented to him an idea that one might be able to find life after trauma.

Still, the mystery about his personal trauma linked to atrocity remains unsolved. A possible answer is stashed in "The Man I Killed," the twelfth chapter-story of *The Things They Carried* (1990). This chapter-story is O'Brien's masterpiece of the soldier's trauma linked to atrocity, which concerns Tim, a young Army draftee and character in Viet Nam, now a 43-year-old narrator and writer. Tim is sitting on the ground besides the body of a young Vietnamese soldier whom he has just ambushed and killed with a hand grenade. Throughout the story, guilt-ridden Tim spends time staring at the dead man and his physical characteristics—his eyes in particular—and imagining his life with a bright future: "His one eye was shut, his other eye was a star-shaped hole" (118). This description or its equivalence appears six times in this seven-page story. The young Vietnamese man happened to be on patrol in the woods and had not noticed Tim and his comrades in the ambush. What traumatizes Tim is the unavoidable truth that his kill was totally unnecessary: "It was entirely automatic. I did not hate the young man. . . . It was not a matter of live or die. There was no peril. Almost certainly the young man would have passed by. And it will always be that way" ("Ambush" 126–27). In other words, Tim killed the man "out of his own fear and impatience, not out of patriotism or soldierly duty" (Nomura, "Symbolic" 92). In one of the



later chapters of the same novel, nonetheless, O'Brien uncovers to the reader that the story about the dead man was made up. He says that he saw many bodies and was too scared to look at them, and, twenty years after the war, he is now "left with faceless responsibility and faceless grief" over "many bodies, real bodies with real faces" ("Good Form" 172). So, through Tim's eyes, O'Brien is staring at this imaginary body in his story. One of the bodies O'Brien refused to look at could have been a young man with a stack of possibilities like this dead man, and therefore, "I [O'Brien] blamed myself. And rightly so, because I was present" (171). Alex Vernon, Gulf War veteran and scholar of war literature, agrees with O'Brien's ambiguity: "It doesn't matter, in the end, whether O'Brien or Tim . . . or I squeezed the trigger that sent the bullet that ended a life. Our presence was guilt enough" (189). Hence, the truth is that the character and narrator Tim did not kill anyone, but the novelist implies that Tim's participation in the war itself is culpable. But, how about the real Tim O'Brien's guilt over his presence in combat?

"The Man I Killed," fiction on trauma linked to atrocity, can be read as a substitution for his most recent piece of nonfiction on the very topic, the thirtieth chapter-essay "Pride (III)" in *Dad's Maybe Book*. Quite astonishing is the confession by O'Brien that is made here. In this chapter, there is a snapshot of young O'Brien and a Vietnamese girl of seven or eight, standing in front of a thatched house. The two are smiling and "all is peaceful." Then the novelist takes the reader to a world of hurt: in the next paragraph, it says that the second photograph exists in O'Brien's memory and in it there is another Vietnamese girl who lies dead in a rice paddy. She must have been hit accidentally by someone's bullet during a short exchange of gunfire between O'Brien's company and Vietnamese snipers. Along with others, O'Brien kept shooting "to stop people from killing me, but as always there had been no visible enemy, only trees and bushes on the far side of a rice paddy, and so I had fired without aiming. . . . The right side of her face is gone. Her mouth is open. One eye is half open" (177). This description of the dead girl's eye resembles the dead man's eyes in "The Man I Killed." Whether or not O'Brien saw the girl during the gunfight is unsaid. And, needless to say, there is no way of telling whose bullet actually put her to death. O'Brien writes that in this gunfight no soldier on either side got injured or died, and only this girl was found dead. One of "some hateful memories of my own" could be a boiling

self-hatred related to this girl's death:

For a while I thought nothing. Then, after a second, I thought: Well, the world must be a better place. Because that's what wars are *for*, right? That's why we kill one another. To make the world a better place. . . . These thoughts were in no way cruel or callous. They were bitter thoughts. I hated myself. At that instant, as I looked down at the dead girl, the world did not seem any freer, any happier, any more democratic, any more just, any more tolerant, any more civilized, any more decent, any more loving, or any less endangered than it had seemed a few minutes earlier. The world felt evil. And I had made it more so. I had gone to the war and participated in the war out of the purest pride. To safeguard my reputation as a good son of America. To avoid small-town censure. To avoid ridicule. (177-78)

This is O'Brien's first nonfiction to unveil a civilian casualty in which he took part. In addition, the girl's situation parallels the man's: the girl would not have gotten shot if she happened to have lived in the next hamlet; the man "would have passed by" if he would have taken a different path or Tim would not have killed him out of fear. The killing of this girl was unforced and accidental like the killing of the man, and yet this did not occur in a face-to-face situation and O'Brien was one of many shooters unlike the man's case. But that probably will not ease O'Brien's pain because the casualty was caused so casually, and *he was the participant in the gunfight*. Confession plays a significant role in O'Brien's work. He draws pain and sorrow of a hero and then that hero makes a confession. This whole process would bring the reader some sort of catharsis. Thus, the admission of guilt and self-hatred exposed in this nonfiction is typical of Tim O'Brien. O'Brien must have seen countless bodies, but this civilian casualty must have dwelled in the center of his *personal My Lai* for a long period of time. Now, in the seventeenth chapter of the same book, "Balance," he tells the reader about how he coped with his dark hours after he returned home from Viet Nam:

By daylight I was fine, but at night I was not fine. When I couldn't sleep, which was almost always, I'd get out of bed, sit at my desk, and try to

dump the terrible shit on pieces of paper—mortar rounds exploding all around me, a young girl dead in a dry rice paddy, her face half gone, one of my buddies telling me to lay off the pity and suck it up and act like a soldier and stop whining about a dead gook. (85-86)

He could not act like a soldier. He stayed with the girl. The number of Vietnamese (north and south; soldiers and civilians) killed during the Vietnam War is believed to be around three million (Ward and Burns 756), and O'Brien asserts that the American soldiers killed more civilians than the enemy soldiers (O'Brien, Herzog 88). Historians Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, who interviewed the participants of the My Lai massacre, state: "It was this Nazi kind of thing,' we were told again and again by men who were there—an observation underscored by a single unassimilable thought: How could we have behaved like Nazis?" (3).<sup>1</sup> Even O'Brien calls American draftees that indeed included himself "the conscripted Nazi[s]" (*If I Die* 93). Fred Turner observes that men like O'Brien feared that "they had come to resemble their forefathers' *enemies* [the Nazis]" (147). Again, although O'Brien never participated in any civilian massacre, the truth is that he was "present" in the site of that girl's death, and it rarely makes his pain any lighter even if she was not anybody's target. That he is making this rather shocking confession probably in his last and *nonfiction* account proves that he is still unable to rationalize her death.

The majority of Vietnam War literature that came out in the 1970s and 1980s concentrated primarily on valor and patriotic experiences. O'Brien's experience never matched those, so he chose to depict the realities of the war, which were the American soldiers' confusion and their civilian casualties. Battle scenes are hard to find in O'Brien's works because his company did not suffer much of face-to-face battles in the guerrilla warfare. Even in his few battle scenes, his characters spend most of their time defending, not attacking, against elusive Vietnamese snipers. "July '69" (2000), the second chapter-story of O'Brien's eighth novel *July, July* (2002), best represents an Americans' failure

---

<sup>1</sup> A My Lai participant, Vernado Simpson admits: "Do you realize what it was like killing five hundred people in a matter of hour or five hours? It's just like the gas chambers—what Hitler did. You line up fifty people, women, old men, children, and just mow 'em down" (Bilton and Sim 131). One fourth of the Jews killed in the Holocaust died in My Lai-like fashion, which is getting gunned down (Anderson 154).

in an enemy ambush. The story sets the distressful tone in the very first several paragraphs by presenting a panorama of the bodies of an American infantry unit being shot down by snipers, which indicates the Vietnamese side's quick victory. Young leader Lt. David Todd inadvertently leads his nineteen men to annihilation:

Second Lieutenant David Todd lay in the grass along a shallow, fast-moving river called the Song Tra Ky, badly wounded, thinking *Dear God*, listening to people die all around him. Hector Ortiz had been shot in the face. . . . Vince Mustin was crying. He had been shot in the stomach. . . . Buddy Bond and Kaz Maples had died in the first burst of gunfire. Happy James had been shot in the neck. Doc Paladino had vanished entirely. (21)

This chapter-story is so unique because it can be taken as a reminder of the one-sided atrocity once committed by Calley's men. It is O'Brien's mirrored version of what took place in My Lai—this time a whole American unit is being gunned down and massacred one-sidedly by a group of Vietnamese snipers. What adds to the tragedy is the fact that this leader is critically wounded after having been shot through both feet but is also staggering to muster the courage to request a helicopter ride home as a sole survivor in the unit. Lt. Todd lies on his back on the grass only half-consciously but never misses a helicopter flying over him in the sky. "Just after dawn, a pair of helicopters swept in low over the Song Tra Ky. Maybe it was David's imagination, maybe the morphine, but for an instant he found himself looking up into the eyes of a young door gunner, rapt, prep-school blue, caught up in the murder of it all. David tried to raise a hand, but the effort made him dizzy" (27). The combination of a helicopter hovering over the site of the bodies and a crew member becoming the site's eyewitness also echoes My Lai. In fact, in My Lai, an Army helicopter pilot, Hugh Thompson, along with his crew members Lawrence Colburn and Glenn Andreotta, witnessed the massacre and risked their lives to stop killings by threatening and blocking Calley's men and saved the lives of Vietnamese civilians.<sup>2</sup> This courageous act by three

<sup>2</sup> In fact, Thompson landed his helicopter between Calley's men and the civilians, and ordered his men Andreotta and Colburn to shoot Calley's men if any of them attempted to kill any more civilians (Angers 80). Later, in the United States, Thompson testified against the

American soldiers gave this horrible incident a little ray of hope and finally saw the light of day in 1998 when Thompson and Colburn returned to My Lai for the thirtieth anniversary of the massacre. O'Brien has thrown a rescue chopper into the field of slaughter to give hope to the desperate American leader on the verge of death, and a similarity between the rescue by those three men and the rescue in this O'Brien's chapter-story hardly seems coincidental. In fact, O'Brien highly praises Hugh Thompson and Ronald Ridenhour and says in an interview: "Hugh Thompson and Ronald Ridenhour behaved with immense moral and physical courage. Statues of both men should stand on courthouse lawns all across America" (O'Brien, Nomura 20-21).

Survival, not suicidality, of a soldier loaded with extreme sufferings in this new-millennium chapter-story might have given the Tim O'Brien reader a new outlook. But what is more surprising is that this piece would raise a question whether there are any other works in American literature which portrays America's militaristic failure as clearly as this is. Although it never matches the size of Omaha Beach or Pearl Harbor, this story's intensity still makes it a frightening holocaust story. For O'Brien, it appears to be significant in showing the world that Americans lose their battle vastly and they die miserably. This masterpiece on sorrow and survival of war was written by the man who once sensed the remaining civilians' hostility in My Lai. He now has transformed a horrific, surreal incident in history into a horrific, cynical piece of art.

Finally, creative writing and education fuse with each other. O'Brien has long shared My Lai with the members of younger generations. While English teachers have implemented O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* and works by other Vietnam-veteran writers for their classes since the 1990s, O'Brien has had many opportunities to give readings and speeches in public. He often mentions My Lai at universities because he finds college students had not been taught anything about the incident at school:

---

participants of the massacre and soon found himself having been criticized by the American public. President Richard Nixon tried to discredit Thompson as a witness and obstruct the judicial process in order to minimize the damage to the reputation of the U. S. Army (98). Among Calley's men, Harry Stanley, Leonard Gonzales, Dennis Bunning, and Michael Bernhardt refused to kill civilians (70).

Our country has an incredible facility for complacency and for forgetting our errors and blunders and evil deeds. My Lai is an example of that. Slavery and the genocide of the Indians are also good examples. . . . [A]long with the white knight we've also worn the black hat many, many times. . . . It's like putting the Holocaust behind you. . . . Someone should say something about the 504 Vietnamese who were slaughtered at My Lai that Saturday morning in March. (O'Brien, Tambakis 106-7)<sup>3</sup>

Since his return from the war, O'Brien has carried the heaviest burden of his generation—grief and guilt over a total of three million dead Vietnamese: “Although I've tried to right the scales by writing and what I say publicly when I give talks, it just doesn't feel that I've done enough in proportion to three million dead Vietnamese. It doesn't feel enough. There are too many dead people and I was part of it” (O'Brien, Nomura 26). Because no other novelist has dealt with Vietnam for so long, it seems as if he is strapping this whole burden on himself.

Tim O'Brien's dream in his childhood was to become a novelist. This survivor of an unpopular war chose to publicize his confessions of painful truth which he hopes will become a warning sign to prevent people from going to war. “You can't take back a mistake, but you can balance the scale by maybe doing better. And I look at my books that are on the surface about Vietnam as a way of making up for that moral failure years ago. I can tell people, ‘Don't do it,’ and to myself ‘Don't do it again’” (O'Brien, Nomura 24). O'Brien has disputed America's abuse of history for more than fifty years and this novelist with rare, fateful connection with My Lai deserves to do so.

In conclusion, to Tim O'Brien, the My Lai massacre signifies evilness, legal innocence, racism, and apathy toward Vietnamese casualties which, in return, has brought him rage, guilt, disillusionment, and criticism against Calley's men and American public's self-deception. In one way, this is O'Brien's

---

<sup>3</sup> Socio-theologist Walter Davis voices a similar analysis: “Americans are not educated for darkness. We are ‘officially optimistic society,’ with little sense of limits or of the tragic. Therefore, the temptation is avoidance, denial, flight” (165). H. Bruce Franklin, a renowned cultural historian at Rutgers University and anti-Vietnam activist in the 1960s, calls the Vietnam War a genocidal war and suspects that most Americans do not know the existence of the My Lai massacre (43).

My Lai as a historical trauma. In another, his autobiography and semi-autobiographical stories imply that he has his own My Lai, his own trauma—his personal hell—consisting of memories of death, guilt, and self-hatred. O'Brien seemingly has decided to live with own trauma, and, as his anti-war stance is explicit in his 2019 nonfiction, he is more than ever conscious of his role as a living witness of My Lai.

*Asahikawa City University*

## Works Cited

- Anderson, David L. *Facing My Lai: Moving Beyond the Massacre*. UP of Kansas, 1998.
- Angers, Trent. *The Forgotten Hero of My Lai: The Hugh Thompson Story*. Rev. ed., Acadian House Publishing, 2014.
- Bilton, Michael, and Kevin Sim. *Four Hours in My Lai*. 1992. Penguin, 1993.
- Davis, Walter T, Jr. *Shattered Dream: America's Search for Its Soul*. Trinity, 1994.
- Franklin, H. Bruce. "Plausibility of Denial." Rev. of *In the Lake of the Woods*, by Tim O'Brien, *Progressive*, Dec. 1994, pp. 40-44.
- Lifton, Robert J. "War Crimes and the American Conscience." *From Nuremberg to My Lai*. Edited by Jay W. Baird, D. C. Heath and Company, 1972, pp. 235-42.
- The New York Times*. "Gallop Finds 79% Disapprove of Verdict." April 4, 1971. Page 56. [www.nytimes.com/1971/04/04/archives/gallop-finds-79-disapprove-of-verdict.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1971/04/04/archives/gallop-finds-79-disapprove-of-verdict.html).
- Nomura, Koki. "Symbolic Aesthetics in Tim O'Brien's 'The Man I Killed.'" *Short Story*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2008, pp. 85-93.
- . "Tim O'Brien: An Interview." With Koki Nomura. *Southwestern American Literature*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2020, pp. 18-27.
- O'Brien, Tim. "My Lai in May." *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*. 1973. Broadway, 1999, pp. 115-21.
- . "The Man I Killed." *The Things They Carried*. 1990. Mariner Books, 2009, pp. 118-24.
- . "Ambush." *The Things They Carried*. 1990. Mariner Books, 2009, pp. 125-28.

- . "Good Form." *The Things They Carried*. 1990. Mariner Books, 2009, pp. 171-72.
  - . "The Nature of the Beast." *In the Lake of the Woods*. Houghton, 1994, pp. 104-12.
  - . "July '69." *July, July*. Houghton, 2002, pp. 19-35.
  - . "Balance." *Dad's Maybe Book*. Houghton, 2019, pp. 78-89.
  - . "Pride (III)." *Dad's Maybe Book*. Houghton, 2019, pp. 172-78.
  - . "The Vietnam in Me." *New York Times Magazine*. 2 Oct. 1994, pp. 48-57.
  - . "The Mystery of My Lai." *Facing My Lai: Moving Beyond the Massacre*. Edited by David L. Anderson, UP of Kansas, 1998, pp. 171-78.
  - . "Tim O'Brien Interview." With Tobey Herzog. *South Carolina Review*, vol. 31, no. 1, 1998, pp. 78-109.
  - . "Tim O'Brien: An Interview by Anthony Tambakis." *Five Points: A Journal of Literature & Art*, vol. 4, no. 1, 1999, pp. 94-114.
  - . Interview. *The Vietnam War: An Intimate History*. 2017. By Geoffrey C. Ward and Ken Burns. Penguin, 2019.
  - . "Tim O'Brien: An Interview." With Koki Nomura. *Southwestern American Literature*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2020, pp. 18-27.
- Summers, Harry G., Jr. *The Vietnam War Almanac*. 1985. Presidio, 1999.
- Turner, Fred. *Echoes of Combat: Trauma, Memory, and the Vietnam War*. 1996. U of Minnesota P, 2001.
- Vernon, Alex. *Soldiers Once and Still: Ernest Hemingway, James Salter, and Tim O'Brien*. U of Iowa P, 2004.
- Ward, Geoffrey C., and Ken Burns. *The Vietnam War: An Intimate History*. 2017. Penguin, 2019.