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A Lesser Imitation (?): How *Redeployment* Recalls, Expands, and Departs from *The Things They Carried*

War is, by far, an incredibly fascinating subject worthy of study. War is compelling, devastating, destructive, restorative, exhausting, enthralling, morally complex, and something that often raises a number of questions. War frequently leaves participants, bystanders, and environments forever changed. Writer Tim O'Brien thoroughly describes war in a complicated manner: "War is hell [...] war is also mystery and terror and adventure and courage and discovery and holiness and pity and despair and longing and love. War is nasty; war is fun. War is thrilling; war is drudgery. War makes you man; war makes you dead" (O'Brien 80). There are aspects of war which are timeless (aggressive conflict between two or more ethnic or religious groups, countries, etc.), and other ever-changing aspects, such as military strategies and battlefield technologies. Even more fascinating is the idea of how exactly war is documented and processed over time—whether it be via veteran's journals, poetry, memoirs, newspapers and other media, documentaries, blogs, Hollywood blockbusters, or most recently, several fictional texts that grapple with the contemporary conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. From about 2011 onward, there has been a surge of novels and short stories that delve into American perspectives of these conflicts. Of particular interest is Phil Klay's *Redeployment*, a compilation of short stories that bears considerable resemblance to (and some departures from) a collection published twenty-four years prior: Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*.

Many debates about Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*[1] (1990) attempt to designate the book as part of a particular genre, and such debates often become circuitous and fail to reach a consensus about the book. When it comes to contemporary war fiction, genre debates about books such as Phil Klay's *Redeployment* (2014) are virtually absent—but this makes sense, given the book seldom blurs lines between fact and fiction. Contrary to *Redeployment*, O'Brien's *Things* features a narrator ironically named "Tim O'Brien" (36), and debates regarding how much of *Things* is fact and how much is fiction seem appropriate, given the deliberate blurring that occurs throughout the book. *Redeployment*, however, does not feature a narrator named "Phil Klay." Rather, Klay's short story compilation features twelve different narrators of various ranks within the U.S. military, providing a micro-panoramic glimpse into the conflict in Iraq.

Genre is still part of the conversation with contemporary war fiction, albeit in a different way than the frequent analyses of *Things*. Contemporary reviewers, scholars, and journalists are quick to judge contemporary war fiction, frequently remarking there is simply not enough of it. Instead of assessing noteworthy texts already on the market, these critics seemingly frown upon the influx of nonfiction writing about the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, sometimes deemed the "booming genre that has conspicuously attracted a host of writers [these] last few years, some of them good but a lot of them bad, resulting in tons of poorly strung literary works" (Mathonniere 5). Criticism aside, this contingent of scholars and journalists—Levi Bollinger, Roger Luckhurst, Sam Sacks, and Matt Gallagher—makes some valid points as they urge veteran writers to produce (more) works of fiction[2]. Matt Gallagher's work investigates the deficit of war fiction, noting, "explanation[s] for this [deficit] vary from the esoteric—wars need to end first before writers can fully capture their impact—to the pragmatic: People don't read fiction anymore" (Gallagher 2). Gallagher's points are intriguing insofar as these wars have yet to end, but fiction that captures at least some impact has been produced. Gallagher's assertions also beg the question of what exactly constitutes

1 *The Things They Carried* will hereafter be abbreviated as *Things*.

2 To assume the production of war fiction is the sole responsibility of veteran writers is an unfortunate mistake—especially in terms of respecting veterans that wish to never share their experiences. At the same time, though, veteran authors offer a great deal of credibility and authority when telling war stories. However, it seems quite possible to construct a contemporary war novel having not served Iraq or Afghanistan. An example of this is Lea Carpenter's *Eleven Days* (2011), a brilliant depiction of a mother-son relationship that becomes increasingly complicated when the son, Jason, goes missing on a highly secret Navy SEAL operation abroad. Additionally, the question of an author's background and military experience also begs the question of *what* exactly constitutes war fiction: Can homefront perspectives be considered war fiction? Are pieces featuring narrators retrospectively recounting their experiences wholly war fiction? Is war fiction something that primarily depicts the lives of military personnel and their experiences in combat?

a war's end—when all the troops have been withdrawn from a war zone? When a political leader announces the end of military campaigns? When a formal agreement has been reached by all countries involved? The answer remains ambiguous, and at times, *Redeployment* recognizes this ambiguity when one narrator (a Foreign Service Officer) notes, "Success was a matter of perspective. In Iraq it had to be. There was no Omaha Beach, no Vicksburg Campaign, not even an Alamo to signal a clear defeat" (Klay 77). Gallagher's work and *Redeployment* both emphasize that black and white answers are obliterated in the face of war, leaving loads of gray space and unanswered (or difficult to answer) questions. Additionally, Gallagher's article fails to note many individuals have returned from their deployments, and their formal experiences of war have concluded; some of these veterans (such as Phil Klay) started writing at the conclusion of their deployments. Gallagher also references statistics relevant to recent war fiction, noting only "an approximate total of 2.2 million veterans" (6) have served in current conflicts, compared with "the 16 million Americans [that] served in World War II, 5.7 million in Korea, and nearly 9 million in Vietnam—even though [Iraq and Afghanistan] are the longest-running conflicts in the history of the United States" (6). Importantly, one of Gallagher's main points to describe the war fiction deficit is that "the pool for veteran writers is simply much smaller than those of preceding wars" (6). Based on the above numbers, this seems to be the case, yet there is still some notable fiction giving voice to veterans and illuminating these wars.

Levi Bollinger also emphasizes the lack of recent war fiction, but rightfully asserts that these wars have "been documented much more meticulously than any war of any previous generation" (Bollinger 2). In a world that increasingly relies on technology which is readily accessible to several global citizens, it is important to consider the myriad ways war can be documented—for example, consider Colby Buzzell's cbftw.blogspot.com blog, which was shut down by the Pentagon, or the three New Hampshire National Guardsmen that used small, portable cameras and captured footage that later became *The War Tapes*. Despite this onslaught of documentation, Bollinger still believes "a genuine need for continued writing does exist," specifically, "[l]iterature that makes readers face the Iraqi side of the conflict is as needed as ever" (Bollinger 5). Bollinger does not specify what sort of authors should write these stories, but the question remains: must the authors be Iraqi? American? Both? Another nationality? What type of author will provide an authentic and understandable portrait of the conflict? How will readers be able to determine what is authentic writing? Even further, is it possible for a non-Iraqi writer to authentically capture "the Iraqi side of the conflict"? (5). Nonetheless, Bollinger's assessment seems accurate: throughout my research, the only novel I encountered which even remotely considered an Iraqi

perspective was Helen Benedict's *Sand Queen*, which oscillates between a story told by Army Specialist Kate Brady and an aspiring Iraqi doctor, Naema Jassim, forced to leave her home in the wake of the U.S. military's invasion of Baghdad. Although my focus is not on Iraqi fiction or Iraqi perspectives, and although *Redeployment* does not feature Iraqi narrators, Bollinger identifies another deficit within the realm of contemporary war fiction as it currently stands[3].

In a different critical approach to war fiction, Roger Luckhurst assesses depictions of Vietnam in conjunction with contemporary war writing, concluding that "[n]o defining literary texts have emerged from the overlapping contexts of the [Iraq] invasion, the Iraqi civil war, or the occupation" (Luckhurst 713). At the time Luckhurst published this 2012 article, it seems he had not yet encountered anything he considered to be a "defining literary text" (713), and perhaps he still has not discovered such a work. *Redeployment* was published two years after Luckhurst's article, and much of my following analysis will be grounded in the idea that *Redeployment* is a defining text regarding the war in Iraq—and at this point in time—the defining text regarding the matter. That said, I will not be making a case for *Redeployment* as a/the "Great American Novel (GAN)" (Buell 1), as I believe Klay's work illuminates a very small population and specific facet of American experience, whereas the GAN must be "subjected again and again to a series of memorable initiations and reinventions in whatever genre or media, thereby giving the text a kind of master narrative status whether or not it set out to be one" (6). Additionally, I believe it difficult to make a case for *Redeployment* as a Great American Novel even on a surface level, as Klay's work is solely comprised of short stories and is obviously not a novel.

Even further, journalist Sam Sacks has a bold take on contemporary war literature, as he blatantly posits the question, "Why are so many veterans retelling the same kind of war story?" (Sacks 3). Unfortunately, Sacks does not elaborate on this assertion—is he referring to themes in stories? Narrative styles? Points of view? Some sort of timeless assertion that is repeated again and again in generations of war stories? While Sacks's ambiguity makes it difficult to ascertain exactly what he means by "the same kind of war story" (3), his assertions are not entirely invalid: there are fundamental, common threads in *The Things They Carried* that are then repeated and present in *Redeployment*. This is not to say these two works are precisely the same, as Klay's work departs from O'Brien's text in numerous ways. Some of my objectives in closely reading and analyzing *Redeployment* were to consider what messages can be gleaned from war fiction, how current conflicts are depicted in one example of contemporary fiction, "to ask exactly

3 Throughout my research and reading, it was also difficult to locate novels and/or short stories that depict the war in Afghanistan, and thus, this lack poses another deficit in contemporary war fiction.

what we have been discovering in the initial decade of Iraq War literature" (Bollinger 10), and to consider ways that *Redeployment* may be read in conjunction with (and ways in which it dramatically departs from) *The Things They Carried*. Furthermore, my research in this field has been grounded in assessing contemporary war fiction that already exists, rather than speculating about what may eventually be published. Due to the scope of this paper, I acknowledge my work within this text will not be an all-encompassing assessment of all notable contemporary war fiction on the market. By investigating *Redeployment* in the wake of scholarship that demands more of and from fiction, I aim to emphasize Klay's book as a notable contribution to recent war fiction while primarily delving into deeper ways in which *Redeployment* compares with—and departs from—*The Things They Carried*.

On a surface level, Phil Klay is certainly aware of Tim O'Brien's work[4], and *Redeployment* may be perceived as a contemporary homage to *The Things They Carried*. Many *Redeployment* reviewers designate the text as destined for classic status, as one reviewer believes, "[Klay's] first collection could become for the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts what Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* is for the Vietnam War" ("Press"). Another review blatantly asks and answers its own question: "Have you been seeking the Tim O'Brien or the Joseph Heller or the Erich Maria Remarque for our foray into Iraq? Mission accomplished" ("Press"). While I do not wish to designate *Redeployment* as an instant classic, I do believe it will be an enduring, notable text that features the war in Iraq. Additionally, after reading O'Brien and Klay multiple times, it is difficult to extract one single, definitive idea of what these texts accomplish, and what sort of messages and understandings about war they impose on the reader. It would be ridiculously dismissive to assume there is a definitive, universal, and clear understanding of war; to make such an assumption unfortunately shuts down any opportunity for multiple interpretations, especially in terms of two wars plagued by myriad documentations and perspectives. Matt Gallagher articulates this question perfectly: "how can there be a definitive GWOT[5] novel when there's no GWOT experience?" (Gallagher 5). If anything, *Redeployment's* twelve narrators with varying deployments, MOS job duties, and experiences of war reject the concept of a singular, definitive experience and recollection of war.

The surface similarities between *The Things They Carried* and *Redeployment* are certainly there: both books are penned by veterans (of different wars), both are composed of short stories, both relay haunting insights and revelations of war, both depict brutal fatalities, and both are concerned (in some capacity) with notions of

4 In the "FAQs" section of his website, Klay briefly mentions O'Brien and *The Things They Carried*.

5 Great War on Terror. Footnote not included in Gallagher's article.

truth, storytelling, and how stories can be utilized, manipulated, and convoluted in the wake of war.

Although *The Things They Carried* predominately features character-narrator "Tim O'Brien" (O'Brien 36), he does not offer one overarching, universal understanding of war. For instance, O'Brien's constant obsession with characteristics that comprise a "true war story" (68) complicate the idea of a singular, universal understanding of war and what a true war story is. At one point in the book, the character-narrator asserts, "You can tell a true war story by the way it never seems to end" (76), only to state a few pages later that "[t]rue war stories do not generalize. They do not indulge in abstraction or analysis" (78). In these small passages, these are contradictory statements—if a "true war story" never ends, a lack of a conclusion would qualify as some form of abstraction, and if it is difficult to pin down a story's ending, the reader would then presumably be encouraged to "indulge" in "analysis" to try and extract some form of meaning, message, or moral from the story (78). At other times in *Things*, it is plausible that the character-narrator is conflated with author O'Brien, and this conflation occurs when biographical the character-narrator discloses personal details that also echo the author's personal history. For instance, character-narrator O'Brien mentions multiple times that he is "forty-three years old, and a writer now" (O'Brien 32), reflecting author O'Brien's age and occupation at the time *Things* was published. Character-narrator O'Brien also mentions he "graduat[ed] from Macalester College" (40) and makes an intertextual reference to "work on a new novel, *Going After Cacciato*" (158). Notably, author O'Brien completed undergraduate studies at Macalester College prior to being drafted, and wrote *Going After Cacciato* in 1978. Although these are small details sprinkled throughout *Things*, said details are always disclosed in first-person, and reflect autobiographical details of author O'Brien's life. Thus, at times, character-narrator O'Brien and author O'Brien are conflated, and the text's ambiguity offers no clarification as to which individual may be narrating *Things* in these particular moments in the novel. Regardless of this conflation, it seems the book still privileges multiple understandings of war and characteristics that comprise a true war story.

Similar to Tim O'Brien, Phil Klay is a veteran author that served in the U.S. Marines as a Public Affairs Officer in the midst of the surge[6], and "started writing [*Redeployment*] two months after he got out of Iraq in 2008" (Dean 2). Klay has a rather quick turnaround in writing about war, as *Redeployment* was published only six years after Klay's deployment concluded, compared with the twenty-odd years between Tim O'Brien's deployment and the publication of *Things*. Many components

6 In short, around the beginning of 2007, the Bush Administration revealed a plan to increase troops and counterinsurgency approaches in Iraq.

of Phil Klay's writing come from a place of experience, which "seems to guarantee a certain authenticity" (Luckhurst 719) and "a special visceral authority" (Anderson 2). In Klay's case as well, there is a sense of immediacy and authenticity—perhaps Klay has possibly witnessed or experienced some of the book's scenes first hand. Although there are not any blatant autobiographical connections between Klay's deployment and the action depicted in his book, there are moments where Klay's experience (disclosed in interviews) may echo scenes from *Redeployment*. For instance, in "Frago," the unnamed Sergeant describes one of his Marines wounded in a house raid, optimistically remarking, "'You make it to Surgical with a pulse, you'll probably leave with one'" (20). Klay makes a similar statement in an opinion piece, "Death and Memory," as he recollects conversations with medical staff when a few "injured Marines" (2) are brought into the surgical center Klay is visiting. Klay recounts how one Marine was reportedly in bad shape, but recalls his own understanding that "if you make it to a trauma table with a pulse, you'll probably pull through" ("Death and Memory" 2). While this nearly verbatim statement raises suspicion as to how much of the book may be autobiographical, *Redeployment* certainly upholds an air of ambiguity similar to O'Brien's work in terms of how much of the text may be based upon actual events in Klay's deployment.

Ultimately, Phil Klay and his characters often do not claim to be articulating the characteristics of a "true" war story, a component found in much of Tim O'Brien's work and showcased in the incredibly popular "How to Tell a True War Story." Character-narrator O'Brien constantly perseverates on what constitutes a particular story as "true," which in turn elevates the reader's skepticism and complicates one's understanding of a true war story. *Redeployment* does not obsessively dissect components of true war stories, but this is not to say *Redeployment* does not grapple with any notions of truth. It certainly does, on a number of levels, but the way in which *Redeployment* presents truth is not as metafictive and self-aware as the subject material presented within *Things*.

Klay's characters noticeably grapple with notions of truth and storytelling in a way that harkens back to O'Brien's work. Mainly, O'Brien's focus is on repeating and retelling stories to the point where components of the story may be changed, omitted, or misconstrued. With O'Brien's work, truth becomes difficult to pin down, as he "offers multiple insights (not a single 'mere thought') in fiction that transcends his personal experiences in the war ('biographical shade'), ultimately offering to readers 'open realization' rather than a narrow or neat vision" (Haswell 94). For example, character-narrator O'Brien notes that "most of this I've told before, or at least hinted at, but I have never told is the full truth" (O'Brien 46). With *Things*, the book's

complicated relationship to articulate characteristics of a "true war story" becomes an effort that frequently raises more questions than answers. Meanwhile, Phil Klay is not as concerned with various aspects of what reportedly constitutes a true war story, but his work shares similar values with O'Brien's stories—especially the idea of repetition and manipulating a story in some way. For example, in "After Action Report," Klay depicts Lance Corporal Paul "Ozzie" Suba, a Marine that manipulates and repetitively tells a story, albeit with good intentions of helping a fellow Marine. The crux of the story revolves around Lance Corporal Suba's experience in a firefight, in which he and a fellow Marine, "Timhead," fire into a building and witness "a thirteen—or fourteen-year-old kid lying on the ground and bleeding out" (Klay 31). Timhead confirms he is responsible for the teenager's death, but then remarks, "'Garza thinks [Suba] did it'" and asks Suba, "'Can we keep it that way?'" (34). Timhead's request leaves Suba shell-shocked, but he agrees: "'Sure, I'll tell everyone I did it'" (34). From this moment onward, Suba tells the story as if he shot the Iraqi teenager: "It was bullshit, but every time I told the story, it felt better. Like I owned it a little more. When I told the story, everything was clear" (Klay 35). With continual repetition, *Redeployment* suggests a storyteller should have a strong sense of ownership over their stories and experiences—yet when these experiences are fabricated, meaning, morality, and truth quickly become muddled.

Additionally in "After Action Report," accepting the responsibility of telling another individual's story comes with a price. The longer Suba tells the story, the more it becomes a burden of sorts, particularly when he notes, "it [the shooting] weirded [him] out, and [he] hadn't even shot the kid" (38). Eventually, Suba begins reporting to his Staff Sergeant to discuss facets of the shooting, noting how he "told [the Staff Sergeant] everything Timhead said about the kid, but like it was me" (41). Although Lance Corporal Suba is composing this tale that solidifies his status as "the only sure killer in MP platoon" (34), and although the story is not actually what readers know to have happened, the story suggests a fabricated story can be believed with enough repetition. Suba ultimately blends together elements of his personal experience and the experience of others, explaining, "there were memories I had, and the stories I told, and they sort of sat together in my mind, the stories becoming stronger every time I retold them, feeling more and more true" (Klay 35). Even if Suba's story is based on a true event and his actions and feelings are fabricated, there seems to be some truth in the feelings he conveys. Importantly, Suba's fellow Marines never question the validity of the story, instead asking "follow-up questions" (35) and thirsting for more details. In fact, it would likely be disrespectful if a veteran were to discount another veteran's

story[7]. No one ever challenges Suba, instead absorbing the gruesome details about the shooting, leaving the reader in an intriguing position, as they know the (presumed) "full truth" (O'Brien 46), whereas the rest of the platoon will presumably never access the readers version of truth, instead accepting "truth" as the story Suba has told.

From another standpoint, Suba's stories place the reader in an interesting position: while readers are aware that Timhead shot the Iraqi teenager, and Suba exaggerates and makes up aspects of the story (including claiming it as his own), other notions of truth in the story become increasingly complicated. In one particular passage, Suba discloses feelings about his deployment, and the passage seems to authentically depict how it feels to be in a combat zone:

> Somebody said combat is 99 percent sheer boredom and 1 percent pure terror. They weren't an MP in Iraq. On the roads I was scared all the time. Maybe not pure terror. That's for when the IED actually goes off. But a kind of low-grade terror that mixes with the boredom. So it's 50 percent boredom and 49 percent normal terror, which is a general feeling that you might die at any second and that everybody in this country wants to kill you. Then, of course, there's the 1 percent pure terror, when your heart rate skyrockets and your vision closes in and your hands are white and your body is humming. You can't think. You're just an animal, doing what you've been trained to do. And then you go back to normal terror, and you go back to being a human, and you go back to hiding. (42-43).

However, since Suba has fabricated details of the story about shooting an Iraqi teenager, it is possible to consider Suba as an unreliable narrator, and thus, it becomes difficult to identify what other elements of the story may be truth and what may be fictitious. Should readers accept passages that reportedly expose Suba's fears? Is it disrespectful to be skeptical of these passages? Are there kernels of truth in the stories Suba tells his fellow Marines, and do these truths (if they exist) reveal something important about the nature of war? That said, aspects of *Redeployment* adhere to storytelling characteristics that O'Brien highlights in his work. For instance, in "Notes," the character-narrator discloses that "[b]y telling stories, you objectify your own experience. [...] You pin down certain truths. You make up others. You start sometimes with an incident that truly happened [...] and you carry it forward by inventing incidents that did not in fact occur but that nonetheless help to clarify

7 Or if a civilian were to discount a veteran's story.

and explain" (O'Brien 158). Suba undoubtedly follows this framework, and while he expands and manipulates the shooting story, the above passage not only complicates notions of truth and trusting narrators, but also reveals that parts of *Redeployment* may be using *Things* as a blueprint or model to successfully tell a war story.

Another story, "Bodies," also grapples with notions of truth and how to tell war stories while discussing a difficult, but often inevitable part of war: identifying and preparing those killed in combat. This story depicts an unnamed narrator that works for "Mortuary Affairs" (Klay 55) and joins the Marines after realizing he was "tired of doing the weaker thing" (56). In the opening of "Bodies," this narrator discloses: "For a long time I was angry. I didn't want to talk about Iraq, so I wouldn't tell anybody I'd been. And if people knew, if they pressed, I'd tell them lies" (Klay 53). This is an intriguing statement, which suggests (perhaps even didactically) that veterans should not be continually pressed to tell their stories, instead given space to process and disclose what they wish to on their own volition. This particular narrator also seems to tell "lies" (53) in some capacity to induce reactions from listeners. The narrator remarks, "[he'd] look at [his] audience and size them up and see if they wanted [him] to keep going. You'd be surprised how many do" (Klay 52). Similar to O'Brien's text (specifically, "How to Tell a True War Story") Klay's narrator offers advice as to how one should tell a story to others, stating, "[t]here are two ways to tell the story. Funny or sad. Guys like it funny, with lots of gore and a grin on your face when you get to the end. Girls like it sad, with a thousand-yard stare out to the distance as you gaze upon the horrors of war they can't quite see. Either way, it's the same story" (Klay 52). The male-female dichotomy presented in this statement is also of interest and certainly different from O'Brien's work, which never hints at a specific, gendered audience[8]. Instead, "Bodies" subtly suggests a storyteller must be aware of their audience and cater to said audience based on sex, which in turn manipulates the story in some capacity. The narrator of "Bodies" continues, noting, "What I liked about the story was that even if it had happened, more or less, it was total bullshit" (Klay 54). As he refers to his stories as "bullshit" (54), the narrator's lackadaisical approach to his stories also encourages skepticism, and raises the question of whether or not anything the narrator discloses is even vaguely true. Additionally, "Bodies" raises the question as to why this particular narrator is telling stories in the first place. Whereas O'Brien's work suggests "[t]elling stories [is] a natural, inevitable process [...] it was a way of grabbing people by the shirt and explaining what had happened to me" (O'Brien 157), Klay's narrator modifies this approach to sharing stories as he "[goes] out drinking with a few friends from high school" (69) and attempts to tell a deployment story to another guy. The listener is

8 On a deeper level, the question of audience is an important one – who is the audience for a war story?

at a loss for words about the deployment, which causes the narrator's aggression to escalate, as he states, "'I don't want you to respect what I've been through [...] I want you to be disgusted'" (71). In a vein similar to O'Brien's writing, this particular story in *Redeployment* demonstrates an aggressive approach to storytelling, and instead of telling a story for one's personal benefit, the narrator of "Bodies" is focused on generating responses from others.

Another *Redeployment* story, "War Stories," offers a more explicit perspective regarding storytelling and its relation to contemporary wars, and begins to depart from *Things* in several ways. "War Stories" is a post-war story[9] that opens as narrator Wilson and his friend, simply identified as "Jenks" (213), await the arrival of two women in an "empty bar" (213) and prepare to speak about their military service. The opening line expresses a sense of exhaustion never found in *The Things They Carried*, as Wilson announces to Jenks that he's "'tired of telling war stories'" (213). Perhaps then, it may not be so much a coincidence that "War Stories" is the third story from the end of *Redeployment*. "War Stories" is also of interest because its focus is not on Wilson, and he is not at the bar to tell his own story, but rather as moral support or "backup of some kind. Or protection" (223) for Jenks. Whereas character-narrator O'Brien believes "stories can save us" (O'Brien 225) and that stories "make the dead talk" and preserve the memory of deceased comrades (231-232), Klay's work operates in a different capacity; Wilson is of the somewhat selfish (but valid) opinion that "if [Jenks] gave this girl his story, it wouldn't be his anymore. Like, if you take a photograph of someone, you're stealing their soul, except this would be deeper than a picture. Your story *is* you" (Klay 225, emphasis in original). Notably, Wilson does not discuss his military service while at the bar, and immediately undercuts his previous assertion about stories, proclaiming he "[doesn't] trust [his] memories. [He] trusts the vehicle, burnt and twisted and torn. Like Jenks. No stories. Things. Bodies. People lie. Memories lie" (226). If we are to accept Wilson's opinions about stories, the implications are two-fold: he suggests telling stories somehow sacrifices a part of one's self or their identity, while simultaneously implying stories and memories are unreliable, but physical evidence of war is to be valued.

Regardless of Wilson's opinion, Jenks shares his story of combat experience and particularly, how he was severely wounded. Interestingly enough, "War Stories" privileges something not found in any selection of contemporary texts I encountered in my research and reading, nor in any part of *Things*: the depiction of a severely

9 To continue with the barrage of questions, it would be intriguing to investigate a selection of war fiction and assess which stories are post-war stories and which ones depict military personnel in the midst of conflict.

injured veteran that lives to tell their story. Early in "War Stories," Wilson provides a harrowing depiction of Jenks:

> [he] shrugs and makes a face. Hard to tell what it means. There's so much scar tissue and wrinkled skin, I never know if he's happy or sad or pissed or what. He's got no hair and no ears either, so even though it's been three years after he got hit, I still feel like his head is something I shouldn't stare at. But you look a man in the eye when you talk to him. (213)

When talking with Wilson before the women arrive, Jenks refers to his face, stating "'Nobody even wants to have to look past this. It's too much'" (218), and this statement in itself briefly serves to highlight the seldom-discussed aspects of war: veterans that return home physically changed or wounded in some capacity.

The story also briefly offers a glimpse of a female veteran, "Jessie" (219), who is revealed as having "a missing finger" from combat and readers soon learn "the Army's got her on 100 percent disability" (Klay 219). Reading further, one learns via Wilson that Jessie "was a Lioness [...and] in some real war shit. Hanging with the grunts, doing female engagement, getting in firefights" (221)[10]. Although Jessie briefly receives spotlight in this story, Jenks is certainly the center of attention. Upon arrival at the bar, Jessie's friend, Sarah, proceeds to interview Jenks "'for a play'" (221) composed "'with a group of writers from the Iraq Veterans Against the War[11]'" as "'a sort of healing through writing thing'" (221). Most of the conversation between Sarah and Jenks is fragmented, as Jenks indicates "'[Wilson would] remember the IED better than [he] would,'" confessing he only remembers "'[s]craps and pieces, at best'" (223). From a storytelling perspective, the exchange between Jenks and Sarah reveals two interesting moments. First, Jenks never voices discontent that he is offering his story to an anti-war group (perhaps Jenks's silence may be interpreted as a political statement in itself), and Sarah never elaborates as to how "healing" (221) may take place through this exchange. Even as Sarah encourages Jenks to tell her "'whatever [he] thinks people should know'"

10 Admittedly, I had never heard the term "Lioness" prior to reading *Redeployment* and delving into more research. Further investigation yielded "Team Lioness" as a small contingent of "female support soldiers out on missions with all-male combat units" (McLagan and Sommers). Interestingly enough, Helen Benedict's *Sand Queen* briefly touches upon fictional Army Specialist Kate Brady and a fellow female soldier, Sanchez, being placed on a similar assignment, yet the sentiment is not the same as depicted in the film Lioness. Instead, Brady and Sanchez are assigned "a shooter mission [...] to punish them! It means you pull security for convoys. [...] It means you're the first line of defense, the first to take fire and the first to get a body part blown off if you hit an IED" (Benedict 230-1).

11 Even further, it is intriguing to speculate as to what intertextual references to actual organizations offer to the overall message of the text – and to the reader. Is this reference to IVAW specifically standing in support of anti-war efforts?

(223), she resorts to asking him to talk about "'[t]he attack'" and "'after'" (223). As far as storytelling is concerned, Sarah is only interested in the event that ended Jenks's service, rather than any other military experiences or anything uplifting about his deployment, if such positive experiences exist. While it may seem more subjective to note, it is worth interrogating what sorts of stories about war, and what questions are (sometimes) utilized to provoke said stories: must war stories always be about the worst thing that occurred during a veteran's service? If a veteran is victim of a serious, life-changing injury, do they reveal anything redeeming about their military service? Are there moments in other texts where veterans regret their service?

In addition to its complicated relationship to storytelling and truth, *Redeployment* further departs from *Things* in its depiction of multiple, first-person narrators. Whereas *Things* mostly privileges a single narrator,[12] the short stories in *Redeployment* offer a glimpse into the lives of twelve different veterans, whether on the war front or in post-deployment reflections. Notably though, there are no homefront or civilian perspectives privileged in the book. Thus, *Redeployment* severely departs from O'Brien's work as Klay draws stark attention to a complicated civilian-military dichotomy that is reinforced in the text.

In *Redeployment*, there is a delicate balance between a sense of authenticity and authenticity that tips the scale, leaving civilian readers alienated. Journalist Sam Sacks is of a different opinion, and believes "veterans have been producing stories of personal struggle that are built around universal truths, stories that strive to close the gap between soldier and civilian" (Sacks 1). In some ways, it seems *Things* strives (in a few stories) to bridge the soldier-civilian gap, and whether or not this was author O'Brien's intention also remains ambiguous[13]. Such efforts arise when character-narrator O'Brien directly addresses his readers and describes how he contemplated ditching the Vietnam draft by fleeing to Canada. Description of this scene arguably works to solicit reader reaction and perhaps bridge the narrating soldier to civilian reader:

> I want you to feel it—the wind coming off the river, the waves, the silence, the wooded frontier. You're at the bow of the boat on the Rainy River. You're twenty-one years old, you're scared, and there's a hard squeezing pressure in your chest. What would you do? Would you jump? Would you feel pity for yourself? Would you think about your family and your childhood and

12 The exceptions to this are the title story, "Enemies," "Church," "Style," "Speaking of Courage," and "In the Field"—six out of twenty-two stories.

13 I'd rather not delve into an intentional fallacy here.

> your dreams and all you're leaving behind? Would it hurt? Would it feel like dying? Would you cry, as I did? (O'Brien 56)

Things attempts to place readers in a similar mindset as the character-narrator at this point in the text, and although a reader can presumably envision this scene, this moment, and the precise emotion it describes, this experience is not wholly accessible to most readers; while readers can certainly experience these events vicariously and obviously at an extreme distance, the experience of reading ultimately does not bestow actual experience upon the reader. This distance between author, character-narrator, and reader thus "is simply making the experiential distinctions clear between 'us and them,' those who served and faced the dangers of war and those who did not" (Herzog 905) and such distinctions are found in Klay's work as well.

Instead of bridging the citizen-soldier dichotomy, a few notable stories in *Redeployment* drive a wedge between military personnel and civilians. The title story of the book briefly grazes the subject of a military-citizen dichotomy, especially as the narrator, Sergeant Price, goes on a shopping trip with his wife post-deployment. Price explains that while shopping, "[he's] safe, so [his] alertness should be at white, but it's not" (12). He goes on to explain the differences between himself and the "people walking around by the windows like it's no big deal. People who have no idea where Fallujah is, where three members of your platoon died. People who've spent their whole lives at white" (12). Especially at this point in "Redeployment," Price seems to suggest civilians "can never possibly know what fighting a war is really like and [Sgt. Price] intentionally draw[s] attention to this division between veterans and civilians" (Herzog 905). As Sergeant Price explicates this color-coded alert system, he further widens the gap between citizen and soldier by scoffing at civilian shoppers:

> They'll never get even close to orange. You can't, until the first time you're in a firefight, or the first time and IED goes off that you missed, and you realize that everybody's life, everybody's, depends on you not fucking up. [...] So that's orange. And then you go shopping in Wilmington, unarmed, and you think you can get back down to white? It'll be a long fucking time before you get down to white. (12-13)

Price's hesitance at the end of this passage suggests his own perspective of security will likely never be the same. It is also somewhat implied that even if Price achieves "white" again, he will never be able to separate himself from his deployment experiences and he will forever be different from civilians.

The civilian-military dichotomy is further distinguished—and these two categories further estranged—as one gradually delves further into Klay's work. *Redeployment*'s second story, "Frago," is jam-packed with military acronyms and abbreviations that are frequently indecipherable to the average civilian reader. The title itself can also be alienating to civilian readers—in the armed forces, "Frago" is often described as a "fragmentary order," or "[a]n abbreviated form of an operation order to change or modify that order or to execute a branch or sequel to that order" ("Fragmentary Order"). Arguably, this title has a different meaning and impact on the narrator, characters in the story, and readers outside the text as it "create[s] the aura of an inside war story" (Herzog 906). To outside readers, the story's various acronyms can make reading comprehension difficult, and thus, the story becomes fragmented, whereas the Marines in "Frago" are more than likely familiar with most or all terminology used, as nothing in the story indicates otherwise. "Frago" begins with a house raid that fails to operate according to plan, resulting in a unit taking "AK fire" (Klay 17)[14]. As a result, one character, Corporal Sweet, is wounded in the chaos, described as "an IED factory filled with some bad motherfucking hajjis, including one pretty high up on the BOLO list. SALUTE report says there's a fire team-sized element armed with AKs, RPKs, RPGs, maybe a Dragunov" (Klay 17). While some readers may be familiar with weapon abbreviations, this entire stream of acronyms is likely to stump civilian readers, in turn creating an estrangement between the veteran author, enlisted characters, and civilian readers. On the other hand, these acronyms provide an authentic depiction of military lingo and the environment that soldiers and Marines must adapt to while enlisted. In a sense, then, "Frago" offers a realistic depiction of infantry life in wartime, which frequently requires split-second decisions and the need for a shortened lexicon.

Acronyms are even more alienating in another story, simply titled "OIF," (Klay 73) and narrated by an E-4, unnamed Marine. The title is an acronym for "Operation Iraqi Freedom," the official name initially given to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. From its beginning, "OIF" baptizes its civilian readers into a dizzying swirl of military acronyms: "EOD handled the bombs. SSTP treated the wounds. PRP processed the bodies. The 08s fired DPICM. The MAW provided CAS. The 03s patrolled the MSRs" (73). Despite myriad acronyms, there are moments of clarity in this story, even if civilian readers do not understand this barrage of confusing military-speak. For instance, readers should vaguely understand the narrator's job duty: "Me and PFC handled the money" (73). Readers can also ascertain this narrator's motive for joining the military, as the narrator discloses: "I didn't need to get some, I needed

14 This is pure speculation, but presumably, many civilian readers would not be able to recognize (without the aid of research) that AK translates to "Avtomat Kalashnikova."

to get the G.I. bill" (Klay 73). Even later in the piece, an IED hits this individual's convoy and the aftermath that unfolds haunts the narrator in the form of survivor's guilt. Again though, the message is decipherable despite the presence of acronyms: "That SITREP was 2 KIA, 3 WIA. That KIA means they gave everything. That WIA means I didn't" (76). On a surface level, the narrator's sense of self is apparent—by not giving "everything" (76) and being "Wounded in Action," the narrator feels guilty and discontent. The constant oscillation from alienation to vague insight thus offers a conflicting perspective to the reader: while readers may understand some battlefield concepts and terms, they do not understand everything. Even further, "Frago" and "OIF" reinforce a civilian-veteran dichotomy, suggesting that despite a civilian reader's efforts to understand a deployment (in Iraq), reading will not allow readers to ascertain first-hand what war is like, nor will readers fully grasp war's impact upon the narrator. This may seem like a hopeless outlook, but this type of dichotomy serves an excellent function in contemporary war fiction: it illuminates actual dichotomies present in reality, demanding the civilian reader's attention and requiring they be a listener, as they (presumably) have no first-hand experience to contribute to a war story. To extend this notion further, Phil Klay lobbies that "veterans need an audience that is both receptive and critical [...others should] listen to their story and try to imagine being in it, no matter how hard to uncomfortable that feels" ("After War"). Although the civilian-military dichotomy cannot necessarily be bridged (especially by reading *Redeployment*), Klay's journalistic work establishes a valid point and offers an approach for civilians to read war stories and to respectfully interact face-to-face with veterans wishing to share their stories.

With many similarities between *The Things They Carried* and *Redeployment*, one may wonder if Klay's text is simply a lesser imitation of its predecessor. The concept of truth, in particular, is rather complicated in both texts—*Redeployment* does not confidently proclaim characteristics of a true war story the way *Things* does, but instead uses some of O'Brien's characteristics to craft and expand narration, storytelling, and complicate notions of truth. The myriad departures *Redeployment* makes from *The Things They Carried* situates Klay's work as staking claim in unique insights, concerns, and stories not previously explored in O'Brien's work. Both texts certainly share similarities, and Klay's writing certainly relies upon and extends O'Brien's work when it comes to aspects of storytelling and truth; however, both texts should be regarded as separate entities. Whereas O'Brien's work "follow[s] the experiences of young men, usually drafted into service, encountering thick jungle, guerrilla warfare, and rock and roll [...] the soldier's experience in Iraq is a different story" (Peebles 1-2). *Redeployment* certainly proves that "Iraq is a different story" (1-2) on numerous fronts, including setting, stiff

boundaries between military personnel and civilians, complications regarding truth and storytelling, and depictions of varied perspectives and opinions. While Klay's work grapples with the war in Iraq from a range of perspectives, *Redeployment* ultimately leaves readers with a better idea of how complex war and its aftermath can be, how "one wartime will [almost] always be seen through the lens of another" (Luckhurst 724), how subjective truth is, and the sense that even in contemporary society, war stories (and the individuals that tell them) still hold vast importance.

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