

Critical Essay:

Narrative Dis/Repair: Interlinked Stories, Trauma, and Narrative Repair

Volume II of II

Submitted by Rinat Harel to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Creative Writing, October 2023.

This thesis is available for Library use on the understanding that it is copyright material and that no quotation from the thesis may be published without proper acknowledgement.

I certify that all material in this thesis which is not my own work has been identified and that any material that has previously been submitted and approved for the award of a degree by this or any other University has been acknowledged.

Signature:

A handwritten signature in grey ink, appearing to be 'Rinat Harel', written in a cursive style.

## Abstract

This Ph.D. thesis is composed of two parts: a collection of interlinked stories and a critical study that investigates the same form. The story collection, *Not That Far from Tel Aviv*, entwines the autobiographical and the fictional, the realistic and the supernatural, the historical and the speculative. The stories involve themes such as life in Israel, home/homeland, war, the Shoa, and intergenerational trauma. With the creative part of my thesis deploying the form of interlinked stories, the critical research focuses on this literary form and, more specifically, its relationship with narratives of trauma. Looking at three collections of interlinked stories—Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*, Micheline Aharonian Marcom’s *Three Apples Fell from Heaven*, and Denis Johnson’s *Jesus’ Son*—my study argues that this literary form reflects narratives of trauma and thus increases their impact and enables a resonant narrative repair.

The question at the heart of this thesis, therefore, is: how does the form of interlinked stories enable the representation of trauma and enact a form of narrative repair?

While the traditional realist novel provides details to create an environment in which the narrative unfolds, collections of interlinked stories often give only the minimally required details and are therefore better designed to deliver disjointed storytelling. I argue that the disjointed nature of interlinked stories reflects and augments the sense of chaos, crisis, and mental and physical breakdown that are typical of war, genocide, and addiction—the themes of the books examined in this study. Moreover, this literary form allows authors to entwine different time periods and merge a variety of styles and genres, which further highlights the disjointed nature of interlinked stories. Consistent across all three story collections is the narrative repair that concludes the books. Practices of storytelling complement processes of healing and of honoring the dead, allowing survivors and storytellers to find some sense of reparative community at last.

Conducting the critical research and writing my story collection had a mutually beneficial effect. While my writing was influenced by my growing understanding of this literary form and its relationship with narratives of trauma, my analysis of the examined three books and the various critical thesis was at times informed by my creative journey.

## Introduction

With my creative project being a collection of interlinked stories, I chose to focus on this literary form for my critical component. The interlinked story collection (also called the short story cycle) occupies an uncertain place in the writing and publishing of fiction. Gerald Lynch described the form as “[A] book of short stories that is more than a miscellaneous collection yet clearly not a novel ...As such, the short story cycle is a middle-way genre” (513). Susan Mann’s definition of the form describes it as “[A] collection of short stories in which the narratives are specifically composed and arranged with the goal of creating an enhanced or different experience when reading the group as a whole as opposed to its individual parts” (12). This form, therefore, shares traits with the novel and the short story, drawing on the strengths of both forms; yet unlike a novel, the narratives do not necessarily have a clear connection from one to the next, but work on a larger scale.

In their book *The Composite Novel: The Short Story Cycle in Transition*, Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris trace the form of interlinked stories to two traditions. The first is texts that were assembled from other texts, such as the tales from the Medieval Arthurian cycle that were compiled in books by Chretien de Troyes, Wolfram von Eschenbach, Thomas Malory, and the *Mabinogion* (12th–13th centuries Middle Welsh). The second tradition is the classic serialized novellas, such as *One Thousand and One Nights* (dates to the Islamic Golden Age, 8th century to the 14th century), *The Decameron* by 14th-century Italian author Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Canterbury Tales* composed by Geoffrey Chaucer in the 14th-century, etc. Lynch writes that “The short story cycle in English is a modern genre, emerging in its developed form only at the turn of

the twentieth century. [It is] a sub-genre of the short story, which began only some hundred years earlier in the practice and theorizing of Edgar Allan Poe” (514).

According to Paul March-Russell, “The emergence of the short story cycle during the nineteenth century, as the minor counterpart of the novel, is implicated in the social changes caused by the effect of modernity upon traditional ways of life” (107-108). Karen Castellucci Cox argues that while most “[C]ritics continue to locate the story cycle genre firmly within a Western tradition ... the genre has clear affinities to oral traditions and to the projects of retrieving communal memory and building community” (151). Therefore, the emergence of the form of interlinked stories might simultaneously reflect a return to oral traditions, as well as the effects of modern life. Or perhaps the form is a simple expression of human life, which is rarely, if ever, organized as a coherent set of episodes, but is mostly typified by fragmented pieces that are left to be strung together and put into a somewhat cohesive narrative. This view resonates with Alice Munro’s explanation regarding her preference for composing stories as opposed to novels: “I guess that’s the way I see life. People remake themselves bit by bit and do things they don’t understand. The novel has to have a coherence which I don’t see any more in the lives around me” (Sloven 76). This incoherence is also—or perhaps even more so—applicable to interlinked stories than the novel: they present people’s experience of life as fundamentally fragmentary, yet at the same time they are bound into one unit, as incoherent as that unit might be.

The rich field of twentieth and twenty-first-century Anglo-American writing shows the rising popularity of this form. Key works include: James Joyce’s *Dubliners* (1914); Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919); Ernest Hemingway’s *In Our Time* (1925); William Faulkner’s *Go Down, Moses* (1942); James Baldwin’s *Going to Meet the Man* (1965); Alice Munro’s *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971), and *The Beggar Maid* (1980); Louise Erdrich’s *Love*

*Medicine* (1984); Sherman Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993); David Mitchell's *Ghostwritten* (1999); and Ali Smith's *Hotel World* (2001). More recently, the collection of interlinked stories has seen successes in books like *I Want to Show You More* by Jamie Quatro (2013) which enjoyed significant coverage and won a few prizes, as well as *Olive Kitteridge: A Novel in Stories* by Elizabeth Strout (2008), which was published to critical acclaim and won the 2009 Pulitzer Prize among a few other awards. It was also adapted into an Emmy Award-winning HBO miniseries (2014). And more recently, Susan Minot's *Why I Don't Write: And Other Stories* made The New York Times list of 100 notable books of 2020.

Since my story collection engages with trauma relating to war and violence in Israel, World War II, and the Shoah, this thesis seeks to address the relationship between the literary form of interlinked stories and narratives of trauma. For this purpose, my research examines three books: Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990; hereafter *Carried*); Micheline Aharonian Marcom's *Three Apples Fell from Heaven* (2001; hereafter *Apples*); and Denis Johnson's *Jesus' Son* (1992; hereafter *Jesus'*). These three collections of interlinked stories present a variety of traumas and viewpoints. *Carried* focuses on the Vietnam War; *Apples* revolves around the Armenian Genocide; and *Jesus'* reveals the perilous world of the addict during the sociopolitical crisis that stemmed from the U.S. Nuclear Arms Race in the 1980s. Additionally, these three books have common themes with my own story collection: *Carried* relays narratives of war and violence told by a nonconformist narrator; *Apples* revolves around the trauma of genocide through the eyes of the author's grandmother, thus involving intergenerational trauma; and similar to *Jesus'*, the idea of UnBelonging runs through my story collection.

These three books exhibit the many ways in which the interlinked story collection engages with narratives of trauma. Furthermore, while each exhibits a different relationship between the form

and trauma narratives, they all implement similar techniques, such as fragmentation, informational gaps, and chronological disorder, which reflect and amplify the traumatic resonance of their narratives. My research finds that the form of interlinked stories is particularly apt for rendering what Paul March-Russell calls the “historical mess of lived experience” (111). I extend and redirect this observation to argue that the form is also particularly apt for delivering impactful narratives of trauma since its disjointed nature also suggests the portrayal of cultural and personal upheaval.

While each of the analyzed books represents a different type of trauma, they all exemplify why the form is especially suitable for telling narratives of trauma. Being less committed to coherence or to linear time than the novel often is, the form of interlinked stories benefits from relative literary freedoms and allows inventiveness and flexibility, such as intertwining different time periods and various literary styles. For example, in *Carried*, O’Brien combines autofiction, metafiction, and Gothic Horror, and the stories meander in time periods, oscillating between scenes from the Vietnam War to accounts that had occurred both before and after the war. In *Apples*, Marcom relays the overall story of the collection’s main protagonist Anaguil in a jumbled narrative arc, and the brief chapters introduce one character after the other at a dizzying pace and in an unchronological order.

While the three story collections focus on narratives of trauma, they all conclude with a story that speaks of survival and hope, thus stringing the fragmented and chaotic storytelling into more cohesive units. Survival and hope are other aspects of repair, offsetting—even if not fully—the sense of chaos, crisis, mental and physical breakdown, and destruction otherwise predominant in these books. This study, therefore, is interested in the relationship between a representation of trauma and the binding of repair, exploring how these authors utilize the form of interlinked stories to represent trauma and enact a form of narrative repair.

“We live in an age of trauma,” writes J. Roger Kurtz in the opening of *Trauma and Literature* (1). With the use of this term becoming increasingly popular in everyday language, he notes, “[T]here is the sense that any understanding of contemporary social problems is only complete to the extent that it is informed by an awareness of the role of trauma in shaping those problems” (1).

In his book *The Trauma Question*, Roger Luckhurst argues that there is a strong link between trauma and modernity. Luckhurst traces the link to

[T]he rise, in the nineteenth century, of the technological and statistical society that can generate, multiply and quantify the ‘shocks’ of modern life. This broad context is the frame that produces the conditions of emergence for trauma in specific disciplines from about 1870 to the Second World War: law, psychiatry and industrialized warfare. (19)

In particular, Luckhurst notes, “[T]he general scholarly consensus is that the origin of the idea of trauma was inextricably linked to the expansion of the railways in the 1860s” (21). The train, a symbol of modernity, also began to symbolize trauma, and physicians diagnosed “railway shock” or “railroad spine,” which were experienced by some of those who survived a train crash yet reported nervous symptoms that appear much later.

It was Sigmund Freud, among other European neurologists, who laid out the key concepts in our present model of trauma over a century ago, writes Kurtz, “and these concepts continue to determine how we speak about trauma today” (3). In her essay “Trauma and Memory,” Silke Arnold-de Simine explains that it was Freud in his 1896 essay “The Aetiology of Hysteria” who first formulated the concept of trauma “as a temporal disruption, destroying or fracturing the narratives of our lives” (144). “According to Freud,” Arnold-de Simine writes, “trauma is

experienced on a spectrum from amnesia through to intense, affective memories ... to misremembered, mistaken, repressed, displaced, or disguised registration” (144). The resurfacing of traumatic events, Cathy Caruth explains, is manifested in “the terrifyingly literal nightmares of battlefield survivors and the repetitive reenactments of people who have experienced painful events” (*Unclaimed Experience* 1). These terrifying nightmares experienced by battlefield survivors were later defined as PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), an additional effect of the aforementioned train accidents that raised questions of responsibility and liability. Elaborating on the legal aspect, Luckhurst writes that “It is for this reason that negligence claims in the law of tort have provided the dominant (although not only) way in which law has interacted with, and fundamentally helped constitute, contemporary notions of trauma” (27). Luckhurst’s argument is that the uncertainty over whether trauma is physical or psychological is linked to which conditions one can insure against. This process resulted in PTSD entering official psychiatric diagnostics in 1980. “The arrival of PTSD,” writes Luckhurst “helped consolidate a trauma paradigm that has come to pervade the understanding of subjectivity and experience in the advanced industrial world” (1). Moreover, he adds, if at first PTSD was assigned to the direct victims of trauma, “‘secondary’ victim status now includes witnesses, bystanders, rescue workers, relatives caught up in the immediate aftermath” (1). In other words, witnesses of trauma.

The concept of trauma witnessing is the focus of Yale literary critic Shoshana Felman’s research about Holocaust testimony. In her article “In an Era of Testimony: Claude Lanzmann’s Shoah,” Felman argues that Lanzmann’s film enacts “the significance of our era as an age of testimony, an age in which witnessing itself has undergone a major trauma. ... [the film] gives us to witness a historical crisis of witnessing” (41). The concept of ‘crisis of witnessing’ was expounded in Felman’s co-authored book with psychoanalyst Dori Laub *Testimony: crises of*



*witnessing in literature, psychoanalysis, and history*. The book presents the Holocaust as “a radical historical crisis of witnessing ... an event eliminating its own witness” (xvii). In other words, the internal contradiction of a trauma that destroyed its victims leads to a ‘crisis of witnessing.’ The Holocaust, which Felman defines as an “event-without-a-witness” (224) since the vast majority of its victims were murdered, generates the necessity of testimony that is derived “from the impossibility of testimony” (224). The lack of witnesses and the necessity of testimony point to a paradoxical reality in which only a small number of survivors of such a vast traumatic event were left to share their experiences and testify against their assailants.

A different paradox concerning trauma was formed by another Yale University scholar, Cathy Caruth. Caruth claims that the overwhelming event was never consciously processed. While the phenomenon of trauma has become all-inclusive, she argues “it has done so precisely because it brings us to the limits of our understanding ... [and so] trauma unsettles and forces us to rethink our notions of experience, and of communication” (*Trauma: Explorations in Memory* 4). Luckhurst seems to agree with Caruth’s claim, writing that “Trauma . . . issues a challenge to the capacities of narrative knowledge. In its shock impact trauma is anti-narrative” (79). In other words, they both claim that the traumatic experience is impossible to narrativize and therefore remains inaccessible to conscious memory. This perception is echoed in Meg Jensen’s *The Art and Science of Trauma and the Autobiographical*, where she writes about her difficulty narrating the violent assault she experienced in her childhood. Jensen, whose research centers on representations of trauma, writes: “Time and time again I tried to tell them [her therapists] about that terrible experience, but for reasons I only now can understand, I found it impossible to do so” (2). Her work brings together academic research and personal experience. Resorting to writing, she states, “I negotiated a way of raising my dangerous memories from the deep” (3). It appears that while

verbal recounting of her trauma failed, Jensen was able to create a written narrative, autofictionalizing her traumatic experience. This suggests that when it comes to traumatic experiences, utilizing writing as opposed to verbal expression offers tools that may help process the event and offer relief. This also suggests that autofiction might be a more useful method than nonfiction when it comes to recounting traumatic experiences and possibly moving toward recovery.

Speculating on the possibility of healing from trauma, Caruth writes, “perhaps it is not possible for the witnessing of trauma to occur within the individual at all, that it may only be in future generations that ‘cure’ or at least witnessing can take place” (*Unclaimed Experience* 136). This suggests, among other possibilities, the intergenerational process of healing. In her book *After Such Knowledge: Memory, History and the Legacy of the Holocaust*, Eva Hoffman reflects on her personal experience as the daughter of Holocaust survivors, describing second-generation Holocaust survivors, herself included, as living with the “internal impact of gratuitous violence and the transmission of traumatic experiences across generations” (xii). However, she argues, these intergenerational traumatic experiences can be mitigated by freeing them from fixating on a nostalgic view of loss. “[A]n international, cross-cultural, or culturally intermingled perspective,” she writes, is more desirable than “certain kinds of exclusive ethnic and religious attachments ... to our ancestors” (197). This intermingled perspective, she explains, could be achieved by transforming the traumatic past into a feasible present and future, thus creating a balanced attitude: “Stand too close to horror, and you get fixation, paralysis, engulfment; stand too far, and you get voyeurism or forgetting. Distance matters” (177). In other words, Hofmann endorses that one finds a balanced relationship with traumatizing events such as the Holocaust. I would like to note that in her book, Hofmann does not discuss passing on her second-generation Holocaust survivor

knowledge of gratuitous violence to subsequent future generations. Although Hofmann makes references to the third generation, a group to which I belong, she never fully explores them, and her term “cross-generational groups” (181) always refers to the generation of her survivor parents and herself. However, my writing regarding the Shoah has been informed and inspired by writers of the second generation to which Hofmann belongs; work that has clearly paved the way for third-generation writers like myself.

While the Holocaust “has shaped many of our understandings of both personal and collective trauma” (Kurtz 6), the concept of trauma, as Kurtz explains, has permeated our awareness as well as our everyday language. Kurtz comments that while the Greek origin of the word trauma is ‘wound,’ thus denoting “a physical injury from an external cause” (1), he defines trauma “as a pathological mental and emotional condition, an injury to the psyche caused by catastrophic events, or by the threat of such events, which overwhelm an individual’s normal response mechanisms” (2). Similarly, based on her study of Freud’s trauma theories, Caruth writes that in his text, “the term trauma is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind” (*Unclaimed Experience* 3), and goes on to explain that “trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on” (*Unclaimed Experience* 4). According to Freud, explains Roger Luckhurst, this haunting manifest itself “through the symptoms and flashbacks and the delayed attempts at understanding that these signs of disturbance produce” (5). Luckhurst claims that Freud’s understanding of how traumatic materials that are repressed and later return in the form of flashbacks were subsequently absorbed in the culture, namely in films, in the form of cinematic flashbacks which typify trauma survivors. He explains:

This unsignalled flashback was invented by Alain Resnais in five revolutionary seconds in the severe Modernist film *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1957) ... [and] later it was embedded in the mass cultural melodrama of *Sybil* as an instantly recognizable device to mark a traumatic return. (180)

The flashback, Luckhurst writes, is “the central device of cinema’s representation of trauma ... an intrusive, anachronic image that throws off the linear temporality of the story” (179-180). The disruption of linear temporality is linked to traumatic experiences due to fragmented memory that often typifies their survivors. Meg Jensen offers a scientific explanation for this phenomenon. “In PTSD,” she writes, “the brain does not integrate the episodic memory of a traumatic event into the semantic memory system properly” (13). Luckhurst writes that “No narrative of trauma can be told in a linear way: it has a time signature that must fracture conventional causality” (9). The disrupted time signature also causes linear storytelling, hence the effectiveness of the form of interlinked stories in relaying nonlinear/disrupted narratives due to the disjointed nature of this literary form.

Accordingly, the three story collections examined in this study exhibit disrupted/disordered storytelling. The first chapter looks at O’Brien’s *Carried* to argue that O’Brien successfully uses the disjointed nature of interlinked stories to upset the reader’s sense of truth and create a sense of instability. Stating, “I want you to feel what I felt” (*Carried* 179), which refers to his traumatizing service as an American soldier in Vietnam, O’Brien creates stories that effectively invoke a distorted sense of reality typical to wartime. The momentous sense of disorientation, anxiety, and imminent danger lead to the author’s ultimate goal: to counterbalance the war’s traumatic effects

through the process of storytelling and create an imaginary realm where “the dead sometimes smile and sit up and return to the world” (*Carried* 221). This illusion of aliveness enables the narrator to reverse events and defy death—his friends’ as well as his own. Referring to the various ends to which writers can put the interlinked story collection, Elke D'hoker writes that

[W]hile some writers use the form to present variations on a theme, or to give a diversified impression of a place and its people, for others it offers a means of moving away from the single-protagonist-driven plot of the novel, staging many different perspectives on a central event. (100)

O’Brien’s tendency to retell the same traumatic event from different angles reflects Freud’s idea of traumatic experiences returning to haunt the survivor later on, or what Caruth refers to as the trauma’s ‘repetitive reenactments,’ and the retelling could be understood as an attempt to dispel the stories’ malignant energies.

If O’Brien’s *Carried* tends to stage many different perspectives on a central event (the Vietnam War), Marcom’s *Apples* exhibits all three points in D'hoker’s argument: the stories present variations on a theme (the Armenian Genocide); the collection gives a diversified impression of a place and its people (East Anatolia region and its various inhabitants during the late Ottoman Empire); and it presents a wide range of perspectives on a central event (the Ottoman Empire’s involvement in World War I and the subsequent Armenian Genocide). The second chapter of the study examines the correlation between the traumatic stories of *Apples* and the form of interlinked stories to conclude that Marcom uses this form—with fragmented, abrupt, and chaotic narratives—to effectively depict the Armenian Genocide’s acutely distressing and turbulent events. Moreover,

by telling the stories of the victims of the Genocide, among whom is the author's grandmother, Marcom adds to the scant historical records relating to the Genocide, trying to piece together the characters' lives into the larger context of the events, while the collection does not imply that the Armenian Genocide can be made narratively coherent. In the face of insufficient historical records, my study finds that fiction can compensate by writing into the gaps in archives—as Marcom skillfully demonstrates in *Apples*.

The study's first two chapters examine the relationship between the form of interlinked stories and narratives of war and violence, while the third chapter looks at a different type of trauma through Johnson's *Jesus'*: the chaotic and perilous life of an addict. In this chapter, I argue that the disjointed nature of interlinked stories effectively reflects and highlights the narrator's muddled and fragmented state of mind, and the stories are aptly typified by a dreamlike quality. The muddled/dreamish storytelling corresponds with both Caruth and Luckhurst's argument that the traumatic experience is impossible to narrativize and therefore remains inaccessible to conscious memory. In addition, the overall sense of UnBelonging that hovers over *Jesus'* is facilitated and amplified by the disjointed nature of interlinked stories.

The fourth chapter of this study focuses on the creative component of my thesis: a collection of interlinked stories titled *Not That Far from Tel Aviv*. The chapter describes how the collection utilizes the form of interlinked stories to represent trauma as well as enable a sense of repair. Unified by the themes of life in Israel, home/homeland, war, the Shoa, and intergenerational memory, as well as by a sense of UnBelonging, the stories entwine the autobiographical and the fictional, the realistic and the supernatural, the historical and the speculative. Infused with an overall feeling, or state of mind, of UnBelonging that runs through the collection the stories reflect the disjointed world of the narrator as well as some of the other characters—the cumulative effect

of unsettling/traumatic experience of war, violence, and displacement. While the stories are bound by a sense of UnBelonging, the concluding story of the collection, “Berlin, Berlin” offers a tentative repair in answering the repeating question ‘where is home?’ as the narrator finds an intangible home within herself.

If the disjointed form of interlinked stories could reflect narratives of trauma, one of the effects exhibited in *Tel Aviv* is a disrupted reality/timeline, typical to those who have suffered traumatic events and experiences. Thus, my story collection attempts to counter the disruption by trying to control the overall narrative, group the stories, and organize them in chronological order. While trauma often results in uncertainty, chaos, and disorder, the collection’s aspiration to control the organization of the narratives is a reparative gesture in terms of reversing things into a linear and (supposedly) controlled timeline.

The agile form of interlinked stories has enabled me to interweave various time periods and a variety of styles and genres. The writing process was guided by O’Brien’s concept of story-truth, i.e., objectifying the writer’s experience by relaying both what truly happened as well as invented occurrences that help to clarify and explain (*Carried* 157). O’Brien’s story-truth corresponds with Meg Jensen’s argument that autofiction can be a more useful method than nonfiction when it comes to recounting traumatic experiences. Based on autobiographical, autofictional, and fictional materials, Rona Hirsch—the main character of *Tel Aviv*—embodies the fluid boundaries between fiction and ‘life-writing’—“a generic term used to describe a range of writings about lives or parts of lives” (Leader 1). Hence, weaving fictional details, narratives, and characters with what is defined as life-writing helped me engage with, and narratively portray, loaded subject matters such as war, violence, and genocide—embracing Eva Hoffman’s view that one should find create a balanced attitude to traumatizing events such as the Holocaust. After leading through destabilizing

experiences of war and violence, the collection concludes with a story that corresponds with Hoffman's view of a balanced attitude by having the narrator reach some inner peace. The collection, therefore, exhibits both representations of trauma as well as enable a sense of repair, as tentative as it might be.

In summary, my study seeks to contribute to the discourse around the literary form of interlinked stories by examining its relationship with narratives of trauma. For this, I examine three books that, between them, explore war, violence, genocide, and addiction. The authors of these books utilize the disjointed nature of interlinked stories to highlight the effects of traumatic stories: chaos, crisis, mental and physical breakdown, and destruction. Yet these books also generate repair, even if a tentative one, through the healing process of storytelling. Since the form is not as committed to coherence as the novel so often is, it benefits from relative freedom that allows inventiveness and flexibility, enabling the authors of these books to bring forth the fragmented nature of their traumatic narratives, and also the reparative possibilities. With my story collection, I aim to contribute to the creative facet of the discourse around the form of interlinked stories and shed some new light on the themes it covers.



## Chapter One: *The Things They Carried* and the Vietnam War

### Introduction

Tim O'Brien, a veteran of the Vietnam War and a prize-winning writer, is the author of *The Things They Carried* (1990), which received France's Prix du Meilleur Livre Étranger and was a finalist for both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award. It has been critically analyzed by numerous scholars, with many articles centering on the correlation between memory and storytelling, as well as the book's cinematic effects. Others have considered it a critical commentary on U.S. imperialism. On the whole, criticism of *Carried* approaches the text in one of three ways: a war story, a postmodernist text, or an example of metafiction.

Mark Heberle writes that O'Brien's traumatic fictions "replicate trauma therapy, which relies on an attempt to communicate to others an ineffable wounding so that the posttraumatic survivor's life can be repaired and resumed" (xxii). Building on Heberle's understanding, this chapter examines the correlation between *Carried* and the literary form of interlinked stories by asking: how does O'Brien utilize the form to represent war trauma, as well as enable a sense of repair? This chapter shows how O'Brien uses the form of interlinked stories to amplify the book's sense of fragmentation, uncertainty, and instability typical to those who have experienced traumatic events. Drawing on the characteristics distinctive of this form allows O'Brien to depict the narrator's fragile sense of self, as well as the Vietnam War's disrupted linearity due to the intermittent routines typical of combat. In his book, O'Brien implements techniques that characterize this literary form: the stories move back and forth in time; they oscillate between first and third person; they intertwine various styles such as fiction, autofiction, metafiction, and Gothic horror; and there are significant information gaps.

The sense of fragmentation is reflected in many of the book's elements, the first of which is the book's title. If the stories are based on O'Brien's war experience, and most of them are aptly told in the first-person, why isn't the book's title *The Things We Carried*? Pasternak offers an answer to this question: "The title of this book should be noted: it is 'they carried' not 'we carried'. This is significant. O'Brien's stories stress the employment of the imagination to achieve the 'idea of truth' by exploring the elements needed to 'create truth'" (42). Pasternak's observation is echoed in O'Brien's metafictional intentions, one of which is stated in the story "How to Tell a True War Story." Here, the narrator makes various suggestions, and the process reveals the difficult, if not impossible, task presented in the title, exposing the slipperiness of 'truth.' I would like to offer another explanation. For that, I look at the book's opening story, "The Things They Carried." Told in the third person and with the narrator omnipresent yet absent, this story creates an emotional distance between the narrative and the narrator. In answer to Pasternak's question, then, I suggest that the book's title reflects the sense of fragmentation that permeates the collection and that the form of the interlinked stories seeks to engage with, work through, and perhaps overcome by offering provisional cohesion.

The literary freedoms offered by the form of interlinked stories (as opposed to the traditional novel or story collection) enable O'Brien to repeat details and narratives using different angles and changed truths and combine various time periods and literary styles, including Gothic horror. Interlinked stories can also link narratives for strategic and reparative effects, which support the book's intention of highlighting both its core plight of fragmentation and instability, as well as the solution for this plight—a sense of repair, even if a tentative one. In summary, I argue that O'Brien utilizes the characteristics of interlinked stories to illustrate and emphasize trauma as well as offer a sense of repair.

## **Part One: Autofiction and Interlinked Stories**

“[A]utofiction,” writes Hywel Dix, “has a dialectical relationship to other branches of French critical theory of the early 1970s, which simultaneously enabled it and obscured it” (73). The term ‘autofiction,’ explains Philippe Vilain, derives from “auto (biography) and fiction ... [and was] invented and defined in 1977 by Serge Doubrovsky upon publication of his novel titled *Fils* (Son): ‘Fiction, made up of events and facts that are strictly real’” (5). According to Vilain, autofiction entails homonymy between its author, narrator, and character, and it plays on ambiguity by involving the fictional and the factual. To further confuse matters, writes Vilain, certain theoreticians such as Philippe Lejeune differentiate between ‘referential autofiction’ and ‘fictional autofiction.’ Practitioners of autofiction from both camps engage in jousting over the correct definition: “the Purists, respectful of the Doubrovskyan bible, and the Infidels, who see autofiction as a simple resurgence of the autobiographical novel” (Vilain 5-6). The debate points to the arrival of the autobiographical novel on the contemporary literary landscape, claims Vilain; the uniqueness of autofiction may stem from its obscure character and the fact that its definition has been raising continuous questioning in an attempt to arrive at a more precise definition. However, he adds, the definition of the term has shifted over the years and “has now entered the vernacular, refers to everything and its opposite. . . . Following fashion, we call ‘autofiction’ just about everything that has to do with autobiography generally” (6). Vilain’s essay was published in 2010, and in 2017 Dix argued that theories of autofiction are finally starting to reach their potential thanks to “developments in the concept of participatory culture ... and the proliferation of various forms of historical and/or cultural memorials, commemorative events and public anniversaries” (69). Theories of autofiction, writes Dix, developed alongside critical theories of structuralism, post-

structuralism, deconstruction, feminism, and intertextuality. Other theoreticians of autofiction include Jacques Lecarme, who claims that Lejeune's autobiographical pact (a form of contract between the writer and their readers) is "rendered contradictory and unstable" (70). Another such theoretician is Isabelle Grell, who claims that by making the autobiographical pact more complex, "various contemporary theoretical developments, including psychoanalysis, structuralism and post-structuralism, all contributed to the development of theories and practice of autofiction" (Dix 71).

The effect of autofiction versus the autobiographical could be examined through two of O'Brien's interlinked story collections recounting the author's service in the Vietnam War: *If I Die in a Combat Zone: Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* (1973) is a memoir, while *The Things They Carried* (1990) is autofictional. Although the stories in *If I Die* are engaging and well-written, I find the collection to be generally less impactful than *Carried* since I find the stories' plain rawness to be off-putting; they lack the imaginative power *Carried* offers to its readers, which takes us beyond the battlefield of Vietnam and into new-fangled worlds. This collection utilizes what O'Brien calls in *Carried* the 'story-happening' as opposed to the mechanism he employs in *Carried* which he names 'story-truth,' illustrated in this passage:

By telling stories, you objectify your own experience. You separate it from yourself. 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 and explain. (*Carried* 157)

In my view, as well as from my personal writing experience, this passage and O'Brien's term of 'story-truth' accurately defines the concept of autofiction. In *Carried*, O'Brien also explains "why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth" (179), saying that during his military service in Vietnam, he was young and too afraid to look at any of the dead enemy soldiers. Years later, while writing the book, he invented a Vietnamese soldier whom he supposedly killed, describing him in great detail so he can "look at things I never looked at" (179). Here, O'Brien combines the factual (his service as a US soldier in the Vietnam War) with the fictional (a specific dead Vietnamese soldier) to create a believable narrative in which he kills an enemy soldier whose corpse he then closely observes and obsessively describes. I understand O'Brien's 'story-truth' as a way for the writer to bring out the emotional essence of the story; staying loyal to its meaning rather than its factual truth. O'Brien clearly states his intention in embracing the 'story-truth' in this book: "I want you to feel what I felt" (*Carried* 179). By teasing out the 'story-truth,' he engages the readers' imagination, thus awakening their emotions and offering a fuller immersion in the reality—and the horrors—of the Vietnam War.

Writing about painful events such as war often entails a form of rewriting as the initial version might be too raw. This I had learned from the experience of working on my story "Wartime Diary," which went through many revision cycles before it seemed to have found its voice. The earlier versions were raw and somewhat convoluted since they were too close in time to the event itself and were rife with frustration, fear, and anger. Then each draft turned out to be softer and more intricate, and the scenes found new reiterations, evolving from life writing to autofiction and even invented characters and scenes, inspired by O'Brien's concept of 'story-truth.' This concept stretches the idea of truth, which autofiction has been concerning itself with since its inception: "For Doubrovsky, the situatedness of the teller of an autobiographical narrative within what is told,

and the uneasy effects of memory and the emotions, all render the assumption of complete truth highly spurious” (Dix 70). In my view, the balance between ‘story-truth’ and ‘happening-truth’ in autobiographical narratives (to borrow O’Brien’s terms) is where the voice of the writer is most evident; it is in this undefined and unstable ‘playfield’ where the creative opportunities await. (With that being said, I would imagine that stretching the ‘story-truth’ too far might result in losing the reader’s trust and engagement.)

In her essay, “Keeping the Dead Alive: Revising the Past in Tim O’Brien’s War Stories,” Donna Pasternak examines the concepts of truth and reality in the author’s work through a postmodern lens. Pasternak concludes that O’Brien’s blurring of truth and fiction is unsettling since the narrator’s truth is “created by acts of remembering and reexamining” (48). As O’Brien himself states in *Carried*: “You can tell a true war story if you just keep on telling it” (80). In O’Brien’s case, retelling means reiteration of details and expansion of narratives, but it also means negation of earlier versions. The truth, claims O’Brien, is not fixed. No story can offer a fixed perspective on reality. Referring to O’Brien’s tendency to retell the same event from different angles in different styles, March-Russell explains that “O’Brien extends this principle throughout his collection, so that the same emotional and physical territory is retraced by narratives that overlap and counterpoint one another, while characters recur from story to story, [since] no single narrative can encompass its meaning” (114). And yet, as O’Brien’s quotation and Pasternak’s criticism suggest, continuing to tell a story adds to its validity. Robin Silbergleid has observed that in *Carried* “the narrator needs to declare the truthfulness of events or details for the book to do its work as a narrative account of Vietnam” (130). We can also turn this on its head: the narrator needs a narrative in order to arrive at something like the truth about his war experience. As Gary Krist points out, O’Brien “works through many of the same horrifying incidents several times, depicting

them from different perspectives, putting them into different contexts” (692). Upon examination of the many published and unpublished versions of *Carried*, John K. Young concludes that O’Brien’s “inveterate revising is not simply a matter of reworking a text for the sake of cosmetic improvements,” but the result of an interest in the process of storytelling itself (2). Evidenced in the material archive bearing the history of O’Brien’s revisions, Young suggests that the author’s tendency to rework his stories “seems to derive from O’Brien’s ongoing struggle to record unsettled, traumatic memories and experiences in texts that are themselves materially unstable” (2). In other words, Young claims that the war’s unsettled/unsettling experiences are reflected in unstable texts.

Adding to Young’s point, I argue that the form of interlinked stories further amplifies and enables the sense of instability as it allows for nonlinear storytelling, fragmented narratives, leaps in time periods, and blurring of author/narrator, which is a meeting point between interlinked stories and autofiction. In line with Doubrovsky’s understanding of autofiction as a homonymy between its author, narrator, and character, in *Carried* O’Brien blurs the boundaries between the collection’s narrator and author, and so “The narrative voice in *The Things They Carried* is neither Tim O’Brien the character nor Tim O’Brien the author nor Tim O’Brien the narrator” (Pasternak 48). O’Brien also expands Doubrovsky’s understanding of autofiction as a play on ambiguity involving the fictional and the nonfictional by reflecting the narrator/author of *Carried* in secondary characters such as Norman Bowker and the aforementioned dead Vietnamese soldier. In the story “Speaking of Courage” Bowker returns home after the war to a town that is quite identical to O’Brien the author’s hometown of Worthington, Minnesota. Also, in a later story, the narrator confesses that Bowker’s harrowing experience of losing a close friend during the war was in fact his own. The dead Vietnamese soldier holds some similar biographical details to the author-

narrator: both were born in 1946, entered college in 1964, and were reluctant draftees. Adding to these details, Koki Nomura notes three additional facts: “[T]heir birthplace is a politically conservative small town; their scholarly achievements are high; and they both feared to lose the respect of family and community by dodging the draft or performing poorly in combat” (90). The destabilized selfhood of the author-narrator in *Carried* points at the fragmented identity of the trauma survivor, or, as Judith Herman puts it, “Traumatized people suffer damage to the basic structures of the self” (56).

This might answer the question raised earlier: why isn’t the book titled *The Things We Carried*? ‘They’ might reflect the destabilized/fragmented selfhood of the book’s author-narrator. By projecting the narrator-author onto the enemy’s narrative, O’Brien widens the definition of autofiction and uses the flexible form of interlinked stories to increase the sense of destabilized selfhood. In this sense, the fusion of autofiction and interlinked stories makes for effective storytelling that might explain why *Carried* makes for a more successful collection than *If I Die*, which does not employ the inventive possibilities of the form as extensively and richly as *Carried* does.

## **Part Two: War Trauma**

Referring to O’Brien’s commitment to writing in a fragmentary form, Pasternak believes that “this fragmentation suggests the author’s disconnectedness from the centre, ‘The World’, the America back home” (44). The emotional disconnect, evident in the stories, is the result of fighting in the Vietnam War— a war the narrator objected to: “In June of 1968, a month after graduating from Macalester College, I was drafted to fight a war I hated” (*Carried* 39). Moreover, the fragmentation is also the result of combat itself, as Paul March-Russell explains: “One of the many casualties of



war . . . is the linear narrative: the ability to tell a story straight is irredeemably affected by the stop-start procedure of trench warfare<sup>1</sup>, in which intense bursts of violence are contrasted with long periods of boredom” (112). The disjointed chronology, what Pasternak calls “jumping from episode to episode” (43), is at the foundation of the book’s fragmentary nature. O’Brien’s choice of literary form reflects the interrupted nature of the soldiers’ reality in the Vietnam War, as the form allows for the stop-start process mentioned by March-Russell.

“War is one of the principal and most obvious sources of trauma,” writes J. Roger Kurtz (12). Similarly, Abram Kardiner writes that “the traumatic neurosis is the commonest neurotic disturbance of war” (3). While all wars, or any act of violence for that matter, have traumatizing effects on humans, American soldiers in Vietnam faced particularly frightful circumstances, fighting an unconventional war against guerrilla combatants who controlled the unfamiliar terrain. Thus, in addition to being exposed to mortal dangers, these soldiers’ psyche was also under threat. As a result, the American soldiers felt targeted not only by the enemy but also by the land of Vietnam itself and everything that inhabited it: “We were fighting forces that did not obey the laws of twentieth-century science. . . . It was ghost country, and Charlie Cong [the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam] was the main ghost” (*Carried* 200). Reflecting on the narrator’s description of a ghostly land, Pasternak observes that *Carried* is typified by a “sense of surreality or new reality” (43) and that “O’Brien relies on Gothic literature’s haunted sensibilities” (45). *Carried* includes a few narratives of Gothic horror, which is characterized as a “battle between humanity and unnatural forces of evil . . . within an oppressive, inescapable, and bleak landscape” (Pagan). For example, O’Brien weaves into “How to Tell a True War Story” a narrative about a

---

<sup>1</sup> The American soldiers in Vietnam used foxholes, the equivalence of trenches, which suited to their constant movement across the land, and O’Brien describes the long hours spent in these holes waiting to detect the enemy’s movement.

six-man patrol that was sent into the mountains to listen for enemy movement. Immersed in a spooky thick fog, the men hear strange sounds coming out of the mountain (Vietnamese music, a cocktail party, Buddhist chants), and, maddened by the sounds, order a massive military attack on the mountain, leaving it scorched. However, the men keep hearing the eerie sounds after the jungle had fallen silent. The unnerving Gothic tale illustrates the relentless fear that permeated the American soldiers in Vietnam and echoes Caruth's assertion that trauma "returns to haunt the survivor later on" (*Unclaimed Experience* 4).

The malleable form of interlinked stories allows O'Brien to weave narratives of Gothic horror in his collection. Reflecting the fragmented memory of the trauma survivor, the sense of haunting typifies the survivors whose memory is affected by the distressing event/s. Freud's understanding of how traumatic materials later return is echoed in the following passage from *Carried*:

I'm forty-three years old, and a writer now, and the war has been over for a long while. Much of it is hard to remember. I sit at this typewriter and stare through my words ... I write about these things, the remembering is turned into a kind of rehappening. ... The bad stuff never stops happening: it lives in its own dimension, replaying itself over and over.

(32)

Nonlinearity and a sense of hunting are some of the devices used by O'Brien in the representation of the Vietnam War. In her book, *Authoring War*, Kate McLoughlin explores representations of war writing across various literary genres. To illuminate the inevitable falsehood of a believable war story, McLoughlin uses as an example the protagonist of *War and Peace*, Nikolai Rostov, who "Unable, for various reasons, to convey his own truth about war ... yields to

a ‘stronger’, more established version of belligerent events” (2). Looking at O’Brien’s story “How to Tell a True War Story” (included in *Carried*), McLoughlin writes that “The title can be understood in two ways: how to distinguish a true war story and how to relate one” (4). To continue my earlier argument regarding O’Brien’s blurred author-narrator character, McLoughlin argues that this vagueness “suggests that the truest account of war may actually be fictional” and so “A ‘true war story’ ... is, accordingly, often unbelievable, unreal, embarrassing and pointless. It makes no sense, except in the gut” (4). “How to Tell a True War Story,” McLoughlin writes, meanders and deviates, making the narrative impossible to grasp as “each section is abandoned for a further apparently futile attempt to convey the actuality” (4). This meandering is clearly intentional, as O’Brien is occupied with the process of telling itself: “In many cases a true war story cannot be believed. ... In other cases you can't even tell a true war story. Sometimes it's just beyond telling” (70).

McLoughlin also discusses *The Sorrow of War* (1991), a novel written by Bảo Ninh who fought against the American army in the Vietnam War. As opposed to O’Brien, who attempts to tell and retell ‘a true war story,’ the protagonist in Ninh’s novel, a writer-combatant named Kien,

reaches a point where ‘the novel seem[s] to be in charge’. It has ‘its own logic, its own flow’ and even seems ‘to structure itself, to take its own time, to make its own detours’. The novel, not the writer, is the active agent ... [and thus] the authorial figure in this moment has abdicated all responsibility. It is as though the war has ambushed the writing, assuming the task of expressing itself. (5)

Ninh's literary approach seems to be contrary to O'Brien's, but they both correspond to McLoughlin's argument that "even as it [war] resists representation, conflict demands it. The reasons that make war's representation imperative are as multitudinous as those which make it impossible" (7). While O'Brien's resistance is represented by seemingly trying to control his war narrative, Ninh expresses resistance by having his protagonist surrender control. I would argue that both authors intentionally oppose the 'traditional heroic war stories' McLoughlin mentions regarding Tolstoy's protagonist Nikolai Rostov: "If he had told the truth to his listeners who, like himself, had heard numerous descriptions of cavalry charges and had formed a definite idea of what a charge was like and were expecting a precisely similar account from him" (1). Rostov surrenders to the perceived war story construct, provides a false yet cohesive and acceptable account, and by doing so he in fact surrenders his own integrity, which both O'Brien and Ninh oppose, and which make their stories an act of resistance to war itself. Thus, to use McLoughlin's observation regarding O'Brien's blurred author-narrator, I suggest that O'Brien intends to convey that war itself (and/or its horrors) "is unbelievable, unreal, embarrassing and pointless" (4). In *Carried*, the blurred author-narrator character, typical of autofiction, is further enabled by the flexible and inventive form of interlinked stories that accommodates fragmented and nonlinear narratives. In other words, the form supports O'Brien's resistance to the Vietnam War, and, as the narrator states, to any war for that matter: "You can tell a true war story if it embarrasses you. If you don't care for obscenity, you don't care for the truth; if you don't care for the truth, watch how you vote. Send guys to war, they come home talking dirty" (*Carried* 68).

Circling back to the aforementioned repetitions in O'Brien's narratives, Gary Krist writes that, similar to Norman Bowker, the protagonist of "Speaking of Courage," who drives around and around a lake in his hometown upon his return from the war, *Carried* also goes "over the same

territory again and again, hoping to dispel the malignant energies of those stories” (692). Hence, beyond the fact that “repetitions act as ambiguous icons of trauma, and the reader is positioned to experience their presence and placement in the text as akin to the traumatic symptoms experienced by the character” (Langdon 346), the obsessive retelling of traumatic narratives also works toward making sense of them and reducing their negative effects. However, the malignant energies in *Carried* intensify rather than diminish as the stories unfold. In escalating these energies across the book, O’Brien paradoxically sets the stage for its conclusion: narrative repair.

### **Part Three: Narrative Repair**

“[T]he issue of ‘recovery’ post-trauma appears murky, as it often consists of defensive survival mechanisms such as dissociation,” writes Suzanne LaLonde (196) and goes on to ask whether literature encourages such recovery, and if so, does this not contradict the notion that trauma shuts down the survivors’ imagination? LaLonde concludes that the literary arts can break through ‘walled off’ traumatic events and establish safety. The author-narrator of *Carried* echoes LaLonde’s argument: “I did not look on my work as therapy, and still don’t. Yet ... it occurred to me that the act of writing had led me through a swirl of memories that might otherwise have ended in paralysis or worse” (157). In other words, O’Brien claims that the act of writing serves him as a sort of therapy, a way through which the malignant energies of his war trauma are reduced, at least to some degree.

Kurtz writes that “Brains can be retrained; wounds can heal. Some practitioners go so far as to argue that working through an experience of trauma can actually leave a person healthier than before” (11). In the ‘working through’ trauma—what Kurtz also describes as “navigating traumatic harm” (12)—as opposed to the ‘acting out,’ “Acknowledgment and remembrance are subsequent

steps” (12). As O’Brien states here, writing is evidently one of his tools for working through trauma. In her book *The Art and Science of Trauma and the Autobiographical*, Jensen testifies: “I gave up on therapy and I suffered. And I wrote. And through writing, I negotiated a way of raising my dangerous memories from the deep. ... in fiction I could create my own answer to the unanswerable question” (3). While the “resolution of the trauma is never final; recovery is never complete” (Herman 211), writing, and perhaps fiction writing at that, could be useful in navigating traumatic harm. Moreover, as Joshua Pederson writes:

The history of the relationship between trauma and narrative is almost as long as the history of trauma itself. Indeed, it is a widely accepted therapeutic truth that the stories we tell about the catastrophes that beset us – both individual and collective – can be crucial tools for recovery. (97)

Expanding on this, I would bring in LaLonde’s argument that storytelling engages with psychic numbing by helping the survivors clarify their emotions. Herman’s argument, that reconstructing one’s traumatic experience can transform traumatic memories, is a poignant one, unearthing even deeper layers in the recovery process of the survivor. Moreover, Herman adds that “In the telling, the trauma story becomes a testimony” (181), an argument that corresponds with Dori Laub’s perception in relation to the Holocaust that “repossessing one’s life story through giving testimony, is itself a form of action, of change, which has to actually pass through, in order to continue and complete the process of survival after liberation” (85). To put it another way, narrating the traumatic experiences serves as a means for repossessing one’s personal narrative, thus turning them into an integral part of the tellers’ self-possession and self-understanding. Or, as Luckhurst

puts it, the survivor alone can gather the fragments of their trauma, creating a passage that gives “the sanction of privileged perspective from that rarest of things, a coherent, if trauma-defined, identity” (64).

Collating these various points and arguments, I would suggest that the process is cyclical: the survivor uses ‘writing therapy’ in their recovery process, and the result, the stories themselves, then become part of the survivor’s self-narrative and an integral part of their identity. However, if storytelling supports the recovery of the trauma survivor, it might offer only a tentative repair. Building on the observation made by Young regarding O’Brien’s many revisions as well as the repeated narratives and details found in *Carried* I would add an argument made by LaLonde: “[H]ealing is tied up and dependent on repetition, suggesting that the process is never complete” (204), a sense of incompleteness that might stem from the uncertainty that haunts the survivor, lingering from the traumatic experience. Kaplan writes that both fictional and nonfictional literature about the Vietnam War clarifies that uncertainty was the only certain thing about that war, and, responding to Kaplan’s observation, John H. Timmerman claims that these uncertainties liberated writers to some degree, making it “possible to speak more freely of courage, cowardice, of fears and fantasies” (111). All these elements are present in *Carried*: the narrator mentions carrying shameful memories; cowardice that is barely restrained; an instinct to run away, freeze, or hide; and nighttime fantasies of flying above and away from the battlefield.

The form of interlinked stories both reflects the war’s uncertainties and correlates to the literary liberation Timmerman describes here. Utilizing these uncertainties as well as the literary freedom that is enabled by the form of interlinked stories, *Carried* shifts between various time periods, combines literary styles, and recounts stories in different variations to eventually arrive at a tipping point of the narrator’s near mental breakdown in the antepenultimate story of the collection, “The

Ghost Soldiers”: “I was trembling. I kept hugging myself, rocking, but I couldn't make it go away” (211). The breakdown provides a psychological relief—a cathartic release—which leads to a significant change, where the narrator reconnects with his humanity: “Again, I felt that human closeness” (212). Hoffman writes that “if we perceive pain as an ingredient of the human condition and believe that its action in our lives enlarges rather than diminishes us, then we can perhaps experience through it a strengthening of our own humanity, and of solidarity with the humanity of others” (49). In other words, trauma has the potential to create something of value, not only sow pain and destruction. Furthermore, Laurie Vickroy suggests that the trauma writer helps “readers discover their own sympathetic imagining of humanity” (2), an idea that corresponds with the narrator’s wish: “I want you to feel what I felt” (*Carried* 179).

Since the malignant energies in the stories intensify and escalate as the collection unfolds, with each narrative containing additional disturbing details and narratives, the cathartic release in “The Ghost Soldiers” is reflected in *Carried* as a whole. Marked by instability and an accumulating sense of horror, the book builds up toward the aforementioned tipping point which serves as the catalyst for a significant change that arrives in the concluding story: “The Lives of the Dead.” Drawing on the collection’s central theme of death and loss, this final story plays a pivotal role in the book through the revival of dead characters, thus negating the stories’ sense of fragmentation and facilitating a feeling of certainty, even if partially, for both the narrator as well as the story collection itself.

In “The Lives of the Dead,” the true and the fictional, the real and the supernatural, past, present, and future—all point to the possibility of repair. The repair O’Brien offers consists of two elements, the first of which is the idea of bringing his dead war buddies back to life: “Ted Lavender ... and Kiowa, and Curt Lemon, and a slim young man I killed, and an old man” (221). Building



on this idea, “The Lives of the Dead” includes a new character, the narrator’s childhood girlfriend Linda who died from brain cancer at the age of nine, briefly mentioned earlier in the book: “I’m forty-three years old, and a writer now, and even still, right here, I keep dreaming Linda alive” (221). Introducing a significant character that late in the book would usually create a sense of imbalance if this were a novel, yet *Carried* enjoys the freedom of stand-alone stories while it also benefits from any associations across its narratives, characteristic to the form of interlinked stories. By creating the illusion of aliveness, the narrator defies death and reverses the experienced loss. Furthermore, the story presents a second element of repair. After he refers to his/the narrator’s eternity through storytelling—“I’m young and happy. I’ll never die” (236)—O’Brien also defies time itself, ending the story with a binding time-leap: “[W]hen I take a high leap into the dark and come down thirty years later, I realize it is as Tim trying to save Timmy’s life with a story” (236). This sentence, the book’s concluding words, builds on previous time-leap transitions and fuses past (Timmy, the narrator’s child-self) and present into a whole. Or, as O’Brien puts it in his story “Spin:” “[S]tories are for joining the past to the future” (35).

While the form of interlinked stories stresses fragmentation, it also allows for the fragmented parts to come together in interesting and innovative ways. In “The Lives of the Dead” the narrator mends the gaps and tears created by pain and loss and offers a tentative sense of repair that reaches beyond his war experience to include life at large. Hence the narrator’s statement at the start of “The Lives of the Dead”: “[S]tories can save us” (221). That is to say, while war can kill us—physically, emotionally, and spiritually—O’Brien suggests that stories have the potential to save us by reconnecting us to our humanity as well as to eternity. The term ‘us’ might refer to the character of the author-narrator, and it might also refer to those who survived the Vietnam War.

But I would like to think that here O'Brien embraces the greater 'us'—all those who can benefit from storytelling, all humans.

The book's trajectory, taking the reader from the horrors and losses of war to the possible repair offered by storytelling, creates a full cycle of death and life. O'Brien's collection uses different perspectives across time to indicate fragmentation, yet the repetition of scenes and themes generates an overarching sense of synthesis. Here, the spatial elements of literary form create a structure and sense of solidity that does justice to the experience of fragmentation but doesn't just repeat it or fall into closure. Instead, it creates a form that makes new sense of the experiences represented. It therefore creates a sense of repair that still bears the traces of the fragmentation of the experience that it has witnessed. In *Carried*, O'Brien simultaneously implements elements of both fragmentation and connectivity, a combination not only made possible by the form of interlinked stories but also enriched by it. Hence, the form of interlinked stories can move between a representation of fragmentation and the binding of repair. Or, as in *Carried*, an attempt at repair.

## Chapter Two: *Three Apples Fell from Heaven* and the Armenian Genocide

### Introduction

Named one of the best books of the year by both *The Washington Post* and the *Los Angeles Times*, and runner-up for the PEN/Hemingway Award for First Fiction, *Three Apples Fell from Heaven* (2001) by American-Armenian author Micheline Aharonian Marcom is an example of an interlinked story collection that delivers narratives of trauma through its portrayal of the Armenian Genocide, which took place during World War I in the region of East Anatolia. The region was part of the ancient Kingdom of Armenia until it was gradually conquered by the Ottoman Empire during the fifteenth, sixteenth, and the start of the seventeenth centuries (*Armenian National Institute*). Together with other influences connected to World War I and the internal reshaping of the Ottoman Empire, the Armenian Genocide could be viewed as a continuation of this act of former colonization. The ultimate goal of the Ottoman/Turkish government was/is to annihilate the Armenian population in their midst, as well as to erase their historical narratives. Marcom's *Apples* attempts to repudiate this goal. By offering accounts told from myriad perspectives and literary styles and forms, the story collection offers a corrected and more truthful history of colonized people who were massacred by their conquerors. According to the Armenian National Institute, "The Armenian population of the Ottoman state was reported at about two million in 1915. An estimated one million had perished by 1918, while hundreds of thousands had become homeless and stateless refugees" (Adalian). Moreover, the Genocide remains an open wound to this day since, "a century after [the] Armenian Genocide, Turkey's denial only deepens" (Arango *A Century After*).

*Apples* is the first in a trilogy, in which the first two titles (*Apples* and *The Daydreaming Boy*) revolve around the Armenian Genocide and its aftermaths, and the third, *Draining the Sea*, focuses on the Guatemalan Civil War. Set against the backdrop of the Ottoman Empire's involvement in World War I and centered around the tragedy of its Armenian community, *Apples* introduces a wide range of protagonists and a confusing chronology of events, relaying the traumatic events through the eyes of the culprits, their victims, and witnesses. However, as the stories unfold, a central character emerges: Anaguil, whose character is based on the author's maternal grandmother, a survivor of the Genocide, and whose continuing presence helps to encompass the fragmented storytelling. In *Apples*, Marcom presents the horrors of the Genocide through disjointed and disordered, fragmented, and abrupt storytelling that reflects the collapse of basic order brought about by the Ottoman Empire's joining World War I and the Armenian Genocide that was carried out during and after the war. While no critical analysis of *Apples* has yet to be published, a few resources such as book reviews and interviews with the author provide useful critical points of entry to this rich and complex text.

The *Kirkus Review* mentions the lack of fiction dealing with the Genocide (*Three Apples Fell from Heaven*), which, I might add, also reflects a broader lack of knowledge regarding this historical event. This double lack informs not only this story collection but also its reception, with some writers and critics seeking to understand the immensity and novelty of Marcom's undertaking by analogy with related atrocities. Margot Livesey, for example, writes that "Like those who write about the Jewish Holocaust, Marcom faces the well-nigh impossible task of speaking the unspeakable; unlike them, she cannot count on her readers to be familiar with the outlines of the story already." *Apples*, claims Livesey, rises to this double challenge by offering relatively short yet highly vivid narratives. Michele Levy argues that *Apples* "powerfully illustrates

not only the Armenian Genocide but the nature of Genocide itself” (Levy 152). Indeed, *Apples* elucidates the manner in which this large-scale massacre has been decided upon and carried out, as well as the complex facets of those who were involved, including Turkish soldiers and their Kurdish accomplices. Alluding to the complexity of characters and viewpoints in her book, Marcom said in an interview: “I remain obsessed with telling stories which to me seem to be elided, ignored, unseen. But these can take various forms and include myriad possibilities including the stories of my maternal grandparents who survived the Armenian Genocide in 1915” (Blood).

With its heart-wrenching accounts and graphic descriptions, *Apples* makes for intense and often uneasy reading, yet its innovative storytelling and style make for a unique book. Similar to O’Brien, Marcom’s use of interlinked stories helps her to convey vivid accounts of trauma while also utilizing the literary freedoms this form offers. One of these freedoms, which O’Brien also implements, is to weave together various literary forms and styles: mythology and religion (the Armenian ancestors, Noah, Japeth, and Haik, the Armenian saint Mardiros); official records (reports by the American consul, Leslie Davis); poetry (Sargis’ poems); supernatural tales (told by dead protagonists); and a list consisting of the Genocide’s victims, provided by one of these dead protagonists.

This chapter examines how by using the form of interlinked stories, Marcom’s *Apples* not only reflects and augments the traumas caused by the Armenian Genocide but, more importantly, by weaving together narratives of fact and fiction, the book adds to the Genocide’s scant records. The factual validates the fictional, the fictive extends the scope of the factual, and together they write into the gaps in archives created by insufficient historical records. *Apples*’ contribution, therefore, offers a collective repair as it turns into a document in its own right, which repudiates the attempts to deny and negate the traumatic past of Armenian history. The book also offers an

intergenerational repair through its author and the book itself; the survival of the collection's main character, Anaguil, enabled the existence of its offspring, Marcom, and by extension, Marcom's existence enabled the creation of *Apples*.

If the Armenian Genocide could be likened to an object that has been shattered into shards, Marcom's story collection reflects the sharp, scattered pieces and also tries to glue the pieces back together, even if the result is partial and odd. The inventive and adaptable form of interlinked stories provided the author with fertile ground to fashion this unique and heartfelt story collection.

### **Part One: Collective Trauma**

If O'Brien's *Carried* demonstrates how fragmentation reflects the traumatic effects of the Vietnam War, Marcom's *Apples* intensifies the component of fragmentation by presenting fifty-four stories with around twenty protagonists and numerous secondary characters. Representing many of the voices involved in the Armenian massacre and diaspora through fiction, *Apples* is a series of vignettes, some tied together, some not; some are tender while many are quite brutal. It is the sense of the differential distribution of traumatic experiences across characters, locations, and ultimately the form of interlinked stories that I focus on in the following pages.

Although *Apples* is a book about the chaotic experience of living through a Genocide, it is also cohesively bound together by a very specific time and place. The book is set in the Eastern Anatolia region, which, until the Armenian Genocide, included a population of about two million Armenians who lived among Turkish and Kurdish communities. Appropriately, the book's protagonists represent a range of aspects, places, and populations of the region during the late Ottoman Empire at the dawn of World War I. The stories in *Apples* are character-driven to a large

degree, even if the appearance and disappearance of some of the characters cannot be easily tracked.

Some of the protagonists are inspired by myths and fables, (listed in the chapter's introduction), while others are drawn directly from historical records, such as Leslie Davis, who is based on the U.S. consul in the province of Harput at the time, and whose invaluable reports about the unfolding genocide provide the reader with factual accounts. Another central protagonist in this book is Sargis, a gay student who hides in his mother's attic writing scatological verse and gradually drifts closer to madness as he witnesses some of the atrocities from his attic window, anxiously waiting to be found by the soldiers and suffer similar brutality. Marking the start of the Armenian Genocide, Turkish soldiers pulled Armenian men from their homes with no warning and often with abject cruelty. With most men gone, as Muslim men were sent to the frontline when the Ottoman Empire joined the Great War, women and children of various communities in Eastern Anatolia were largely left to fend for themselves. This dire reality is reflected in Marcom's choice of protagonists:

- 1) Anaguil, a teenage Armenian girl left to care for her younger siblings after they were orphaned;
- 2) Rachel, a Catholic girl who escaped the brutality of the Turkish soldiers when they invaded her monastery and threw herself into a well from which she is telling her story;
- 3) Maritsa, a Muslim woman who turns to prostitution after her abusive husband is sent to fight in the war, leaving her and his extended family destitute;
- 4) Lucine, an Armenian woman who subjects herself to sexual exploitation by the American consul Leslie Davis in her desperation to try and save her young son;

- 5) Dickran, an Armenian baby who is possibly dead after being abandoned by his mother during one of the death marches forced on the Armenian population by Ottoman soldiers;
- 6) Haigan and her mother, both forced into a death march during which Haigan is kidnapped by a Turkish soldier;
- 7) The (nameless) girl from Erzincan, who is also forced into a death march with her elderly mother, whom she eventually abandons;
- 8) Arsinee, an Armenian woman who survives the Genocide.

This cast of characters is indicative of Marcom's story collection, in which women and children feature prominently. Chief among these characters is Anaguil, whose coming-of-age narrative is shattered by the shock of Genocide. Representing both groups of children and women, Anaguil, who is now the protector of her younger siblings after the death of her mother, symbolizes the fragile/uncertain future of her family. Marcom's use of the form of interlinked stories reflects and augments this sense of uncertainty.

Marcom's choice of child characters reflects the reality of children in the Ottoman Empire. In her book *Ottoman Children and Youth During World War I*, Nazan Maksudyan claims that World War I gave birth to the concept of 'total war' since it was the "first large-scale industrialized military conflict in world history . . . which implied the systematic erosion of the distinction between the military and civilian spheres" (81). Maksudyan describes how the seeds of the Armenian Genocide were planted well before World War I, with the Ottoman government recruiting its Muslim-Turkish children and youth to propagate superiority over minorities through paramilitary education. Explaining the plight of Ottoman children during World War I, Maksudyan writes:



Both boys and girls, especially when they were unattended or orphaned, were considered to be under greater threat in wartime conditions. Not only were their lives in danger owing to war circumstances, poverty, and starvation, but they were also under the moral threat of losing their religion, nationality, and, in the case of the girls, their chastity. Unprotected children were being adopted or abducted, even bought, sold, or married. (103)

Presenting a majority of children protagonists whose lives have been upended and even destroyed during the Armenian Genocide, *Apples* highlights the social plight by emphasizing fragmentation, as children not only represent the most vulnerable members of society, but they also symbolize futurity—the destruction of the young will inevitably lead to the destruction of their community. The child’s experience of an acute breakdown of social order is behind Marcom’s exceptionally fragmented story collection. Moreover, if *Apples* is likened to an extraordinary long dream, with its “leaps in time, the abundance of plot lines, the casual occurrence of unspeakable events, and the persistent flashbacks all give the text a distinctly dreamlike quality” (Zaleski 62), the collection’s graphic brutality renders its dreamlike quality a nightmare. The nightmarish reality of the Genocide’s victims results in physical breakdown. The children’s destruction echoes, or perhaps embodies, the decimation of their Armenian community, the erosion of their habitats, and possibly of their history. Marcom deploys the disjointed nature of interlinked stories to reflect and stress the collapse of basic order as well as augment its nightmarish quality.

If the fragmented nature of O’Brien’s *Carried* reflects the multifaceted trauma experienced by the American soldiers in the Vietnam War, *Apples*’ fragmented storytelling echoes the severe trauma inflicted on the victims of the Armenian Genocide. The book’s multitude of narratives,

protagonists, antagonists, and secondary characters, as well as the brevity of the stories, create a collection of oddly positioned fragments. Although the repeating characters of the book have their stories appear in chronological order (as opposed to those of the collection's central character Anaguil), their narratives unfold in no particular pattern, and the stories of the nonrepeating characters are randomly sprinkled throughout the collection, augmenting the book's sense of disorder. Hence, the unfolding reality of a shattered society described in the book is not only reflected in its content—graphic descriptions of abuse, injury, and murder that often contain gruesome details—but also in its style, as it is told in brief chapters that introduce one character after the other at a dizzying pace, and oscillate between the years 1915 and 1917. The book's overall impression is therefore akin to sharp shards of glass; a seemingly solid object has been shattered and the story collection serves as an attempt to glue the pieces back together. Alas, many of the shards are still missing to this day. The lost, hidden, and/or misplaced archives make for a silenced history. This, in turn, could be represented by haunted language, as Gabriele Schwab suggests: “[H]aunted language uses a gap inside speech to point to silenced history” (54). With quite a few of the narratives told by dead characters who provide disturbing and eerie descriptions, the book is indeed shrouded by a haunted presence that stands for the collective trauma caused by the traumatic Genocide.

Speaking of the haunting presence of the Shoa, Hoffman argues, "Stand too close to horror, and you get fixation, paralysis, engulfment; stand too far, and you get voyeurism or forgetting. Distance matters" (177). Hoffman suggests negotiating appropriate distance from traumatizing events while she also recognizes the challenge of “how to find the right tone of response, and measure of expression, in relation to this event” (177). Told in brief and horrifying accounts that call for the reader's full and immediate attention, *Apples* is a direct and blunt story collection—the

distance Hoffman mentions is thin, perhaps even nonexistent. While similar to the Shoa, the Armenian Genocide was what Hoffman calls, a ‘history-shattering event’ (xiii). The ongoing lack of recognition on the part of the Turkish authorities as to their part in the Armenian Genocide (as opposed to the Germans regarding the Shoa) might explain *Apples*’ urgent tone. This urgency might reflect the fact that in many ways the history of the Genocide is still shattered since many of its records have been destroyed, repressed, and hidden. Moreover, as “Trauma is produced by persecution of subjects to whom all agency and principle have been denied” (Hoffman 36), and with agency still being denied by the successors of the perpetrators, the trauma caused to the Armenians rightfully calls for urgency, a mode Marcom uses to a great effect.

In spinning the complex tale of the Genocide, Marcom uses another interesting method. Referring to the Shoa, Hoffman asks: “How should we, then, from our distance, apprehend it? What meanings does the Holocaust hold for us today—and how are we going to pass on those meanings to subsequent generations?” (ix). I believe that a similar sense of responsibility for the legacy of the Genocide’s victims drove Marcom to compose *Apples*. It is, first of all, a filial responsibility, since “Most of all she [Marcom] wanted to make it right for her grandmother, Anaguil, who died when Marcom was 9” (Krikorian). By ‘making it right,’ I believe Krikorian means honoring Anaguil by telling her story, thus preserving both her experiences and her memory. On the macro level, perhaps placing her grandmother’s story at the heart of the collection serves Marcom as a mechanism to try and weave the narrative of the Genocide into a coherent narrative—spin the macrocosmic/collective trauma around the microcosmic/individual narrative. Thus the micro reflects/augments/echoes the collective trauma which might be difficult to grasp, and it is the malleable quality of interlinked stories that supports the unusual construct of this story collection

## **Part Two: Intergenerational Trauma**

With cruelty, terror, and loss underwriting its stories, *Apples* replicates the turbulent reality caused by the Armenian Genocide. Introducing myriad characters and rapidly evolving events, Marcom conveys the incomprehensible extent of the Genocide, generating a sense of anxiety, destabilization, and chaos that might overwhelm the reader. I believe it was the author's intention here to achieve what O'Brien has stated in *Carried*: to have the reader feel what he felt. Or, in this case, what the victims of the genocide have felt. While many of the book's characters experience severe suffering and horrific deaths, it is through the book's central protagonist, Anaguil, that Marcom evokes the reader's greatest empathy. Woven through the collection's many stories, Anaguil's narratives unfold in a confused chronological order that echoes her rapidly collapsing world: both her parents die; her Armenian community is being expelled, murdered, and it gradually vanishes; and, disguised as a Turk—her people's oppressors—she needs to quickly adapt to her new role as a parent to her younger siblings in an increasingly unstable and dangerous environment. To add to the confusion, Anaguil's stories oscillate between the first and the third person. This method might reflect the entwined voice of author-protagonist. With the protagonist being the author's grandmother, this fusion points to the fact that Anaguil represents both her threatened Armenian community as well as her family bloodline. I believe that this author-protagonist fusion can be described through Marianne Hirsch's idea of 'intergenerational transmission' (14), i.e., the transfer of intergenerational trauma through memories and stories shared by the survivors and passed on to later generations. This fusion of voices renders Marcom more than a conveyer of past traumas—her voice has been assimilated in the story collection; the author is now an active participant in the book she writes. The flexible and inventive nature of

interlinked stories facilitates the fusion of this author-protagonist voice since the reader becomes accustomed to unusual structures of storytelling as the narratives cascade before our eyes. Thus, Marcom's transformation into an active participant in her own literary work does not strike us as being odd or improper.

Building on the filial responsibility mentioned in part one of this chapter, the author-protagonist dynamic in *Apples* suggests what Hoffman calls "a sense of a living connection" (xv) in reference to the guardianship of the Holocaust being passed on to later generations. Pondering the concept of 'a sense of a living connection,' Hirsch writes that it "can be maintained and perpetuated even as the generation of survivors leaves our midst ... [yet] at the very same time, it is being eroded" (1). Maintenance/perpetuation and erosion suggest contradiction, the cause of which might be found in the questions Hirsch asks: "What do we owe the victims? How can we best carry their stories forward, without ... in turn, having our own stories displaced by them?" (2). The balance between keeping a living connection with past generations of trauma survivors while creating independent narratives for ourselves is a delicate one. Marcom's possible reply to the questions raised by Hirsch is to fuse past and present into one voice, thus diminishing the "risk [of] having one's own life stories displaced, even evacuated, by our ancestors" (Hirsch 5). Blending her voice with her grandmother's—thus seeing/feeling/experiencing the trauma through her—might have offered Marcom a new view as to her own place in the overall narrative of the Armenian Genocide.

The blending/fusion of the grandmother-granddaughter voices into one is also exhibited in the recounting of Anaguil's portraits. In *Apples*, photography is mentioned twice: Leslie Davis' photographs documenting the Armenian slaughter, and those of adult Anaguil as the book draws to an end. Anaguil's photos are described in the first-person voice, and the descriptions of the

closely observed images are written in an intimate diary style. This suggests that here too Marcom fuses her own voice with that of her grandmother. Hence, the transfer of intergenerational trauma in *Apples* also occurs via visual images. The idea of transferer of intergenerational trauma points at Postmemory, a term coined by Hirsch, which “[D]escribes the relationship that the ‘generation after’ bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before—to experiences they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up” (Hirsch 5). In *Apples*, remembrance through images as a fused voice is two-pronged: while Marcom carries the trauma of her ancestors, Anaguil bears the scars of her own traumatic experiences: “I am in my twenties, but you can see in the photograph that I am not a careless young woman. Thick wrinkles make ledges beneath my eyes... In my thirties I begin to age quickly” (*Apples* 256-257). Anaguil’s early aging could be explained by van der Kolk’s idea of the body keeping the score, which occurs, he explains “If the memory of trauma is encoded in the viscera, in heartbreaking and gut-wrenching emotions” (88). Although the photos were taken years after Anaguil had escaped Turkey and was now living in a new and safe environment, her body was aging young, carrying the burden of past trauma.

If Postmemory is “a *structure* of inter- and transgenerational return of traumatic knowledge and embodied experience” (Hirsch 6), then by describing her grandmother’s portraits in a voice that sounds like that of her own, Marcom has these visual images display the embodied experience of postgenerational trauma. The legacy of reimagined embodied experience, therefore, enables fiction to produce not only records but also communicate the effects of trauma. Marcom’s choice of fragmented narratives and their arrangement in the book speaks of the magnitude of the Genocide’s trauma from which one cannot quite heal, as the marks of this event are forever etched in its victims and their descendants. Or, as van der Kolk puts it: “[T]raumatic experiences do leave

traces, whether on a large scale (on our histories and cultures) or close to home, on our families” (1). If the fragmented nature of interlinked stories reflects the shattering effects of traumatic experiences on a macrocosmic level, it could also effectively deliver the devastating effects of trauma on the microcosmic level, i.e., the intergenerational trauma carried over to the descendants of the victims.

### **Part Three: Narrative Repair**

The significance of storytelling in *Apples* begins with its title, which partially captures a popular Armenian idiom: “And three apples fell from heaven, one for the storyteller, one for the listener, and one for the eavesdropper” (*Apples* 97). In her research into the meaning of this phrase, Anne Avakian explores Armenian folktales to find that God is the “source of the apples” (95), that Armenian mythological tales speak of “the fructifying power of the apple, its association with love, life, and immortality,” and that “Armenians also look upon the apple as a simple gift of friendship” (96). She also finds that some sources suggest that this enigmatic expression relates to the conversion of Armenians to Christianity, and this “may have been one way of declaring after the narration of folktale, that the message of the new faith had been heard” (97). In other words, the phrase speaks of rewards offered to both storytellers and story hearers, be they listeners or eavesdroppers. Pointing at the value of remembrance in *Apples*, Livesey argued that while the book is about love and tenderness, custom and ritual, generosity and courage, it is about, “above all, the necessity of remembering -- oneself, one's family, one's language, one's history.” Moreover, Livesey writes, “One way to remember, as the title -- which comes from an Armenian saying -- suggests, is to tell stories.” In summary, by using the first part of the idiom for the book’s title, Marcom points at the entire phrase to highlight the significance of storytelling through which the

suffering of her people is remembered and honored, thus resisting the efforts of denial and suppression of the Armenian Genocide. The resistance is a form of repair using storytelling. Marcom says in an interview: “I was interested in what survivors didn’t talk about. . . . There was so much shame for the survivors. Some of it unspeakable. Shame of rape. Shame of having survived” (Krikorian). The author giving voice and agency to the victims of the Genocide is akin to resistance through storytelling.

In the context of *Apples*, Marcom is naturally the storyteller, and I would suggest that Leslie Davis, the U.S. consul stationed in Harput at the time of the Genocide, might be the listener since he was attentive to the plight of the Armenian victims during the Genocide. Witnessing the horrific events as they unfolded, Davis reported his observations to the American Ambassador in Constantinople and also took photographs documenting the suffering of the Armenians. The reports and the photographs were eventually published in a book titled, *The Slaughterhouse Province: An American Diplomat's Report on the Armenian Genocide, 1915-1917*. In some of his reports, Davis mentions the Harput province as the 'Slaughter-house Vilayet' of Turk, writing: “That which took place around beautiful Lake Goeljuk in the summer of 1915 is almost inconceivable. Thousands and thousands of Armenians, mostly innocent and helpless women and children, were butchered on its shores and barbarously mutilated” (Davis 76).

If the Shoa suffered a crisis of witnessing, the Armenian Genocide also suffers, to this day, from insufficient documentation of the atrocities. Some significant archives from the Genocide were unearthed as recently as 2017 by Taner Akcam, a Turkish historian whose “life’s work has been to puncture, fact by fact, document by document, the denials of Turkey” (Arango *Sherlock Holmes*). Davis’ testimony, therefore, adds an important part to an ongoing effort to retrieve and piece together Genocide-related documentation. Through the process of listening, the listener (in



this case, Davis) becomes what Dori Laub calls “the enabler of the testimony – the one who triggers its initiation, as well as the guardian of its process and of its momentum” (58). Moreover, as Anna Hunter writes, “Through the testimonial process, therefore, the listener becomes as much a witness to the traumatic event as the speaker and even takes on some ownership of the trauma” (71). Hunter’s argument of ownership is echoed in Laub’s claim that “the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event” (57). In that sense, Marcom and Davis both play active roles in the ongoing effort to preserve the events of the Armenian Genocide and rectify the historical injustice.

Marcom and Davis also participate in an act of residence. During the start of the Genocide, risking his own life, “Davis tried to keep as many [Armenians] as he could out of harm’s way ... [by allowing] dozens to hide right under the nose of the Ottoman government, in the American consulate” (White). He also helped many of the sheltered “safely relocate in Turkey ... [or] escape to Russia, via boats that sailed discreetly along the Euphrates” (White). Witnessing the mass expulsion of Armenians, Davis resolved to uncover their fate, surveyed the surrounding countryside, came upon emptied Armenian villages, and when he eventually discovered thousands of corpses, many of them around Lake Goeljiuk, he documented the horrors with his camera. The significance of Davis’ documentation was two-fold: in real-time, the reports he wrote were included in the statements sent to the State Department in Washington as well as to the press in New York, causing a sensation when the information was published: “In its extensive reporting on the atrocities, The New York Times described them as ‘systematic,’ ‘deliberate,’ ‘organized by government’ and a ‘campaign of extermination’” (Jacoby). Beyond his vital role during the Genocide, Davis’ reports, as well as the photographs he took of the myriad victims, form a substantial body of evidence that is now publicly available, thus contributing to the ongoing effort

to unearth the full scope of the Genocide. Marcom's act of residence is the creation of *Apples*. In an interview, the author said that she became interested in the "telling of [a] story about the inner landscape, as much as the outer, and how stories, via the symbol, in myth, encode knowledge" (Avagyan). By encoding knowledge, *Apples* is a form of resistance and disruption to the status quo of silencing the events of the Armenian Genocide and their afterlives.

In her book, Marcom includes Davis as one of the main characters and directly quotes from his official reports in two stories titled "American Consulate." Marcom also makes a reference to the photographs Davis took at Lake Goeljuk in the story "Rachel Eskijian, B. 1900, A Catholic Girl." Rachel, a dead Catholic girl speaking from the bottom of a well down which she threw herself to avoid the brutal Turkish soldiers, states: "I wrote down what I cannot, in my glory, remember anymore: It is a story. I stuffed the words into a crevice at the top part of the well where the cavass of the Counsel Davis of America would later hide the photographs of Lake Goeljuk. They were the pictures that Mr. Davis could not take with him" (37-38). One of Davis' pictures, depicting rotted corpses lining the shore of Lake Goeljuk, might have inspired the horrific description conveyed by the fictive character of Baby Dickran: "We stretched for miles across the desert plains. ... the human sculpture we made with our thousands of bones and bodies becoming bones, with our skin and the fat underneath that melted in the midday sun like soft clay" (65). In summary, Davis' documentation and Marcom's story collection complement one another. While Davis' reports relay a general tragedy, Marcom endows the anonymous victims with a voice, a face, and a personal history. In other words, *Apples* imagines the individuality of a traumatic event of a massive scale through specific characters who embody various genders, ages, backgrounds, religions, social standings, and living/dying experiences. In this collection, fiction engages with

reality to evoke what O'Brien terms as 'story-truth.' To this end, Marcom creates the character Rumor.

With this large-scale genocide suffering from a lack of surviving witnesses, the author creates fictional ones to capture the various aspects of the Genocide. While *Apples* presents us with a wide array of fictional characters, including mythical and dead protagonists, one of the book's most inventive characters is Rumor. Its origin could be found in the story "A Sad Ending Again," in which a Turkish commander who oversees the reshaping of East Anatolia regional maps says: "Who believes the fables and rumors of the djinn against history stories? Soon we'll have tomes of books to elucidate the What Has Always Been True today and yesterday, for two thousand years or more" (247). Here, the words 'fables, rumors, and the djinn' signify the invalidation of Armenian history in a region that has inhabited Armenian communities "for two thousand years or more." Marcom replies to this invalidation by creating the personified character Rumor, which epitomizes the resistance to the attempt to silence and deny the trauma of the Armenian victims. Sporadically mentioned in the collection, Rumor relays Armenian myths, fables, and historical facts. Marcom thus appropriates the word, negates the Ottomans'/Turk's aforementioned objective, and validates the history of her people. Marcom, however, also ridicules Rumor: "Don't believe her, she's a liar of the first order. A mendacious tatterdemalion. A middle of the night whisperer" (1) and "there is a surfeit of rumors. A surfeit of surfeit" (3). Yet it seems that this tongue-in-cheek approach is aimed at her people's oppressors, hinting at their ongoing distortions and denials, perhaps even ridiculing them.

Imparting myths, fables, and historical facts, the role of Rumor is also to bridge the gaps created by insufficient documentation. Marcom's intention to add fictional narratives to the records of the Genocide is revealed through a few of the book's characters. The idea is introduced in the story of

the baby “Dickran, whose name went unrecorded” (59). Narrating his short life, Dickran tells us how he was abandoned by a tree as his family was marched away by Turkish soldiers. Here, Marcom gives agency to one of the Genocide’s many infant victims—Dickran and his family now exist as part of the Armenian chronicles even if their particular details are fictional. Similar to Dickran, Rachel Eskijian also adds to the records of the Genocide. Referring to the numerous Armenian victims, Rachel wonders: “Will there be enough ink and parchment to transcribe the lists?” (34). A later story, titled “Rachel’s List in Part,” comprises names of the Genocide’s victims. Indicating that Rachel’s list is partial, Marcom not only points to the missing historical records but also to the ongoing process of retrieving the missing and scattered Armenian archives. Here too the factuality of the particular details is irrelevant since Marcom intends the list to contribute to a more coherent account of lived experiences, even if the account is fictional and incomplete. By adding a passage from the New Testament to her story, Rachel delivers the ultimate intention behind Marcom’s story collection, i.e., to create a record that exceeds time and place: “[H]eaven and earth shall pass away; but my words shall not pass away (Luke 21:33)” (38). This suggests that the words of *Apples* will not pass away, either. Not only will they not pass away, but they now create an additional account and join the Genocide-related records.

By linking Rachel’s fictive record-keeping with the historical character of the American consul Leslie Davis, Marcom anchors the supposedly rumored Armenian stories in unshakable reality. The author thus weaves together various narratives that have the factual validate the fictional, the fictive extend the scope of the factual, and together they write into the gaps in archives created by insufficient historical records. The form of interlinked stories enables Marcom to seamlessly weave narratives of fact and fiction since this literary form enables the writer to present stories that are not all stand-alone, as is the case in *Apples*, while, when presented together, the collection

works collectively and therefore joins the records of the Genocide. Adding to the records, *Apples* is then not only an act of resistance, but it is also, and perhaps more so, an attempt at repair, as it is part of the ongoing effort to override the denial and lack of recognition on the part of the various Ottoman/Turkish authorities since World War I.

To conclude the interpretation of the aforementioned Armenian idiom, “three apples fell from heaven, one for the storyteller, one for the listener, and one for the eavesdropper,” I would suggest that the eavesdropper is us, the readers. Since the collection reads like a social-historical puzzle in which the pieces are disordered and scattered, and the reading process is an endeavor to recreate the larger picture, “Like the characters themselves, we must piece together their lives” (Livesey). With the reader being an active participant in the story collection, we now bear witness to the traumatic events of the Genocide, and therefore, similar to the witness/listener of trauma, we partake in the process of repair that drives the narratives of *Apples*. I would also suggest that although *Apples* is rife with violence and death, its driving force is nonetheless survival and hope. If the stories offer a sense of repair by adding to historical records and thus resisting/negating the efforts to silence the events of the Armenian Genocide, the collection also offers intergenerational repair, first through its main character, Anaguil, and, by extension, through Marcom herself. This maternal continuity symbolizes hope for the future and negates the oppressors’ attempt to destroy the Armenian people.

In five stories all titled “Inside,” Marcom presents Anaguil’s relationship with her transforming body, which she prods to be “reassured by its adolescent functions that she still exists” (Levy). Anaguil’s acknowledgment of her developing body has offered her a sense of safety, even if a fragile one. With every reassurance stripped away, Anaguil can count on herself alone, or more precisely, on her body—the only “object” that is truly hers. Moreover, “to understand the world,

in real and imaginative form, one must acknowledge the body and the signals it sends about the world. If the body and mind are disconnected, if the body has been made strange, how can the world be interpreted?” (LaLonde 198). Surrounded by chaos and destruction as basic order rapidly collapses, Anaguil holds tight to the most basic anchor to life: her body. The form of interlinked stories is akin to a story installation, where the narratives, presented separately, are juxtaposed with other narratives to create additional meanings. The story of the girl from Erzincan, forced into a death march with her mother, could be juxtaposed with that of Anaguil. After being abused and raped by the Turkish soldiers, the girl concludes: “You lose your body like this” (189), “This is not me . . . I no longer have a body” (190), and “Perhaps I’m not really a girl, I’m stone” (191). The two girls exhibit opposite narratives—one loses her link to her body while the other prods hers for reassurance. Juxtaposing the two narratives, the reader might see Anaguil’s prodding of her body as a way of avoiding losing herself to the oppressors, as have many other Armenian girls. The associative link between these two girls might evoke in the reader’s mind a whisper from Anaguil: *I am not a stone*. The ‘story installation’ that the form of interlinked stories intrinsically offers makes for a dynamic interaction between the collection’s various narratives, generates new connections and meanings, and thus the whole is far greater than the sum of its parts. Or, as Gerald Lynch put it, collections of story cycle “both stand on their own and gather accretively to form more meaningful communities of fictions that, in turn, enlarge the meanings of each individual story” (513).

Furthermore, the associative correlation between Anaguil’s aforementioned portraits and the photos of death and destruction taken by Leslie Davis might suggest a ‘photo-installation’ as well—one that juxtaposes demise and survival. If, as Hirsch writes, “Extracting whatever information we can from fragmentary documents . . . [we] realize that allowing the image to fade

back to its initial size, we might be able to make space for the possibility of ‘life’ rather than ‘death in the future’” (76), then Marcom’s ‘photo-installation’ makes space for the possibility of “life” rather than “death in the future” with Anaguil’s documented survival set against Davis’ images of mass death.

By prodding her transforming body, Anaguil also tries to connect with her dead mother: “She touches herself to remember. Mama. Mama: I don’t know if I can remember you in this skin and bone, collarbone, you gave me on the day of my birth” (54). Recording her physical development and linking it with the woman who birthed her, Anaguil tries to self-assure and keep her mother’s memory alive. Moreover, caring for her younger siblings, Anaguil now functions as her mother’s replacement and extension, and so remembrance infuses her with the dead mother’s (perceived) qualities and provides her with some parental reassurance. Anaguil’s relationship with her body is a response to her fast-changing world, as the existence and functions of her physique are the basis for survival and self-validation, as well as filial and historical authenticity and continuation.

An additional character that prods his body is the poet-student Sargis. Referring to both Anaguil and Sargis living in hiding, Levy writes that “masks erode autonomy; to the fragmented self, the body alone remains whole.” Sargis, hiding in his mother’s attic disguised as a woman and obsessively prodding his body, validates his existence by smearing his own bodily secretions on surfaces of his attic room, externalizing the new reality that threatens to consume him and his people. Trying to validate his authenticity, he thinks: “This is the way the world is. . . . Is my shit, my urine, my snot, my semen, spit, sweat . . . I am.” (171). Sargis seeks validation through pain, or as Hoffman puts it: “just as war was the ground of being, so pain was the ground of personhood” (13). However, the process of validation of his personhood gradually develops into self-destruction which ends with his gruesome death at the hands of the Turkish soldiers. Both Anaguil and Sargis

seek reassurance through their bodies as their world comes apart. However, while Sargis engages in self-destruction, Anaguil keeps validating her existence, seeking hope and survival. These two characters represent the opposite effects of trauma: destruction and survival—death and life. Anaguil and Sargis experience the social-political upheaval separately and very differently, yet their paths finally cross toward the book's conclusion, when Anaguil learns about Sargis's publicly displayed death: "They left part of that youngman in the town square ... His head on a pike for viewing" (251). The discovery sets Anaguil on a different trajectory of liberty and survival: "I understand that we cannot remain. We must leave this place" (251). The aforementioned juxtaposing of these two characters is directly suggested in this virtual encounter.

Anaguil's survival is told in two stories: "Today is Wednesday" and "My Darlings." The stories exhibit jarring leaps in time and location, as well as sharp transitions in the narration voice and perspective. "Today is Wednesday" is told from two different perspectives: a third-person narrator, and Anaguil herself in first-person narration. It is as if Marcom's voice is infused with the spirit of her grandmother and the two women became one. Supported by the malleable nature of interlinked stories, the infusion of these two voices—especially within the fragmented and disordered storytelling of *Apples*—feels seamlessly woven. Hence, Anaguil and Marcom's doubled voice represents the inherent transmission of trauma, passed on from Anaguil to her descendants. However, their unified voice also suggests an intergenerational repair, which is delivered in the book's final story, "My Darlings." Here, *Apples* comes full circle, relaying survival and projecting hope into the future. The story recaps Anaguil's journey: after walking through empty Armenian villages and towns across East Anatolia, she and her younger siblings finally arrive in Beirut, where Anaguil "smells the sea air which she has always dreamed of," gathers her siblings, and tells them, "My darlings, new spring has arrived" (264). 'New' and 'spring' stand for



fortified hopefulness. While in the direct context of the story, ‘My darlings’ refers to Anaguil’s young siblings, it also extends back to her dead parents and their ancestors, as well as forward to her descendants, Marcom et al—a threefold survival story of intergenerational endurance and courage. Thus, a link is established to bridge the past, the present, and the future—a continuation that genocides interrupt and possibly sever. In the case of the Armenian Genocide, the continuation of Anaguil directly defies the attempt to annihilate her people and erase their history. An additional facet to this multi-generational survival story is the creation of *Apples*, in which, similar to the character of Rachel Eskijian, Marcom also demonstrates the idea of survival through storytelling. The author creates an apparatus—a book of interlinked stories—to try to account for and even attempt to repair the damage caused to her people, as limited and partial as this attempt might be. The book, which would have not been composed if Marcom’s grandmother did not survive the Genocide, contributes to the preservation of the Armenian people, their culture, and their history.

Storytelling is a force that unifies ancient and persecuted people such as the Armenians who relied on folktales to record their history, culture, and memories. Weaving together fables, mythologies, historical records, and fictional and semi-fictional narratives, *Apples* carries on with this tradition since the collection is “above all, the necessity of remembering—oneself, one’s family, one’s language, one’s history” (Livesey). The necessity to remember, underlined by Anaguil’s constant evocation of her dead mother, is the driving force behind *Apples*. The remembering is fundamental to the continuing effort to retrieve the experiences of those who partook in the Armenian Genocide in order to create a more coherent account and try to rectify, however belatedly, the Genocide’s gross injustices. Marcom’s remembrance of her grandmother, as well as the mass of Genocide victims, holds a similar significance to righting past injustices. Furthermore, as Hoffman elucidates:

On the collective as on the individual plane, the need for recognition through memory, for shared mourning and common commemoration, is intense. Without these palliating responses, it is exceedingly difficult for individuals and groups to put the past behind them, to move on. (61)

Accordingly, while *Apples*' stories approach trauma and loss, Marcom's overarching theme is nevertheless an attentive effort of reconstruction, which, even if tentatively, offers a sense of repair. Similar to O'Brien's *Carried*, here too the form of interlinked stories intensifies the fragmented-traumatic elements, and thus the effect of repair conveyed in its concluding story is also increased. Moreover, Marcom seems to utilize the form to a greater extent than *Carried* by offering a far more fragmented story collection, in which the reader is required to constantly engage in restoration work, thus participating in the effort to create a more coherent account of the Genocide, i.e., take part in the work of repair through storytelling. At the end of a long list of horrific tales of human injustice and suffering, Marcom delivers resonant hope; as the past and the future converge, one enables the other, and the fragmented storytelling comes together into a more cohesive unit, offering the ability to imagine a different and better future for Anaguil and her family, as well as for the Armenian people at large. If, as Hirsch argues, "[p]ostmemory's connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation" (5), then the form of interlinked stories enables Marcom to deploy the art of storytelling to particular effects that encapsulate traumatic experiences, their shattering outcomes, as well as deliver hope: an attempt at repair of what cannot quite heal, yet not all is lost. Anaguil and her siblings have survived, and the filial legacy continues. A symbolic new spring has arrived. In conclusion,

returning to the analogy of the glass object that has been shattered into shards, Marcom's story collection tries to glue the pieces back together, even if the result is partial and odd.

## Chapter Three: *Jesus' Son* and Addiction

### Introduction

American author Denis Johnson (1949-2017) was best known for his short story collection *Jesus' Son* (1992), which was adapted into a movie of the same name (1999), and for his novel *Tree of Smoke* (2007), which won the National Book Award for Fiction and was a finalist for the 2008 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. He also wrote plays, poetry, journalism, and nonfiction.

*Jesus' Son* is a collection of interlinked stories that is widely acknowledged to be based on the author's life as an addict in the 1970s. The book's title is taken from the Velvet Underground's song, "Heroin": "When I'm rushing on my run / And I feel just like Jesus' Son." The characters in the book inhabit a world riddled with drugs, alcohol, violence, and crime. Yet despite the solemn subject matter, the stories make for an easy and fluent read, and the text was described as having a "curious narcotic effect" since readers find an "equivalence between the dislocations of perception facilitated by narcotics and the dislocations of perception effected by narrative" (McClure Smith 180). The book's dislocated perceptions evoke a wide range of reactions: alarm and disgust, yet also compassion and humor.

Marked by a sense of imminent danger, violence, and unrest, the stories' nightmarish quality mirrors the narrator's internal and external realities, i.e., the addict's chaotic and perilous life. We see him stumble through events and circumstances without grasping the full meaning of what befalls him, and the book's characters randomly appear and disappear. Akin to dreams, the stories' sense of place and time is ambiguous, and the characters "move through a fragmented America presumably unrecognizable to the majority of [*Jesus' Son*] readers" (McCarron 51). The fragmented America McCarron refers to implies an ongoing crisis. The deep sense of brokenness, convoluted

reality, and emotional detachment in Johnson's book could be attributed to the ramifications of the U.S. Nuclear Arms Race, which gained momentum around the time the book was published. The ongoing crisis suggested in the book might be the backdrop of the narrator's traumatic existence, which is exhibited in the stories' general sense of alienation. As a result, the narrator seems to embody the concept of 'UnBelonging'—the effect of a traumatic existence. In this chapter, I argue that the disjointed nature of interlinked stories effectively reflects and highlights the narrator's muddled and fragmented state of mind, and the stories are aptly typified by nightmarish quality. The jumbled storytelling corresponds with both Caruth and Luckhurst's argument that the traumatic experience is impossible to narrativize and therefore remains inaccessible to conscious memory. Here, Johnson's storytelling seems to oscillate between telling and not-telling his narrator's traumatic experiences, as if dipping in and out of his conscious memory.

*Jesus' Son* has been reviewed through various lenses. Paul Lyons compares the book to Kafka's work (194), Kevin McCarron claims that "in Johnson's work drugs often form part of a religious experience" (58), Philip Connors argues that "Johnson's novels evince a strong streak of Calvinism . . . in which the apocalypse is more often personal than planetary" (253), and Timothy Parrish claims that "the narrator of *Jesus' Son* hopes like his namesake to adopt a perspective that can transmute the world's suffering by absorbing it into his own" (26). While the book clearly uses Christian images, I concur with McClure Smith, who argues that while *Jesus' Son* has been mostly examined through its Christian language and symbols, its narrator replaces his drug addiction with storytelling, using Christian symbolism to redeem himself. His redemption, even if a tentative one, arrives in the concluding story of the collection, in which he finally arrives in a place where he feels he belongs, thus upending the sense of UnBelonging that hovers in the book's preceding narratives, embracing his desired vocation as a writer. Similar to the concluding stories of *Carried*

and *Apples*, *Jesus*' final story also delivers a resonant sense of repair that brings the collection full circle and strings the disjointed stories into a cohesive unit.

### **Part One: Addiction and Interlinked Stories**

Describing one of his friends, *Jesus*' narrator writes: “[T]here was kindness in his heart . . . His left hand didn't know what his right hand was doing. It was only that certain important connections [in his brain] had been burned through” 42). The description, however, aptly captures the mind of the narrator himself: that of the addict. *Jesus*' readers are invited into the world of the narrator and are bound to his subjective view with no omniscient narrative perspective. The book's “fictional landscape is peopled by lost souls—the sinners, the misfits, the desperate—waiting for a perpetually postponed salvation in a haze of alcohol and heroin” (McClure Smith 180). This drug-induced haze, the cause of the narrator's muddled state of mind, is reflected in his traumatic reality—his inner and the outer worlds intertwist to form a highly subjective account, characterized by chaos. The chaos, in turn, is represented by the disordered and tangled storytelling, where narratives jump from one scene to the next, and certain segments sometimes spread across different stories. For example, the narrator opens the book's second story, “Two Men,” with “I met the first man” (13), yet he introduces this second man only in the eighth story, “The Other Man.” The suspended completion of the initial narrative, and the lack of association between these two men, echo the narrator's confused and flickering mind, and a sense of convoluted reality, revealing a strange world, reverberates throughout the book.

To exhibit the narrator's jumbled mind, Johnson peppers the stories with seemingly random occurrences, characters, conversations, and even fragments of conversations. Similar to *Apples*, *Jesus*' stories are also oddly positioned fragments, although here the fragmentation reflects a state

of mental chaos, not the traumatic effect of the Armenian Genocide. (It is worth noting that due to the highly subjective view of the narrator, it is difficult to tell whether the chaos is induced by drugs, or the drug usage is linked to a more general sense of chaos. However, as was mentioned earlier, the general sense of instability in the book could be ascribed to the consequences of the U.S. Nuclear Arms Race.)

The narratives' disordered arrangement is also exhibited in the story "Dirty Wedding," in which the narrator follows a man he sees on the train, only to conclude at the end of his stalking adventure that: "I could have followed anybody off the train. It would have been the same" (80). The disconnect between the reader's expectation for a meaningful quest or encounter through the narrator's suspenseful stalking, and the narrator's dismissal of any such expectation creates a sense of disorientation, the unsteady storyline reflecting the narrator's state of mind as well the reality around him. The sense of disorientation is augmented by frequent time leaps. In the story "Out on Bail" the narrator keeps updating the event that unfolds before him, people buying drinks for a man named Jack Hotel, according to his evolving understanding of what he sees and hears. The reader is thus privy to the scene's meaning as the narrator puts together facts from various time periods, and we gain comprehension as the story unfolds until his mind fully grasps what his eyes are seeing. He then explains: "There were many moments in the Vine [bar] like that one—where you might think today was yesterday, and yesterday was tomorrow, and so on" (32). The idea of a disjointed sense of time is further highlighted in the following story, "Dundun," in which Jack Hotel appears alive and well although he died from an overdose at the end of the previous story. Such time/narrative leaps in *Jesus* point at the narrator's muddled mind. In his book on the nature of narrative, H. Porter Abbott asserts that "we seek to grasp what we see not just in space but in time as well. Narrative gives us this understanding; it gives us what could be called shapes of time.

Without understanding the narrative, we often feel we don't understand what we see" (10). Accordingly, the stories' time leaps point to the narrator's lack of understanding of what he sees, hears, or experiences, and the reader is left to make sense of this disjointedness on their own. Or, more likely, fails to do so, which might refer to McClure Smith's observation of the book's "curious narcotic effect." We are drawn into the hectic world of addicts and criminals, surrender to its rules, and are fascinated by its strangeness. The disjointed nature of interlinked stories allows Johnson to incorporate time leaps in his stories, thus deploying the form to both represent and enhance the disjointed mind and world of the addict.

With its strange and disjointed narratives, *Jesus*' is typified by a dreamlike quality, and as in dreams, "the cell walls between the separate tales are . . . completely permeable: narrative leaks into narrative" (McClure Smith 186). Marked by a sense of imminent danger, violence, and unrest, the dreamlike quality—similar to *Apples*, though far less gruesome—is characteristic of a nightmare. In the book's opening story, "Car Crash While Hitchhiking," the narrator gets into a car even though he has a premonition they will later get involved in a deadly crash. This foreshadows his lack of control over, or emotional involvement in, his circumstances. In the same way, he seems passive and ineffectual about the appearance and disappearance of secondary characters, as in "Two Men." He narrates: "I had forgotten my friends had come with me, but there they were" (13). Such instances characterize the state of dreaming, where the narrative is being created or realized in real-time. Indeed, there are frequent references to dreams in the book, mostly those dreamt by the narrator but also by other characters, such as the narrator's roommate in the story "Steady Hands at Seattle General." In "Work," the narrator even enters his friend's dream: "I'd wandered into some sort of dream that Wayne was having about his wife, and his house. It was turning out to be one of the best days of my life, whether it was somebody else's dream or



not” (51). Referring to this story, McClure Smith writes that “the most significant ‘work’ is the dreamwork” (187). By entwining dream and reality, Johnson invites the reader to enter the narrator’s state of mind, where the two are inseparable. Moreover, “within the stylized form of the interlinked tales, similar dislocations are also effective in imbuing the collection as a whole with the blurred quality of a waking dream” (McClure Smith 185-186). To put it another way, Johnson seems to embrace what O’Brien dubs as the ‘story-truth’—have the reader feel what the narrator of *Jesus’* felt: the effects of the addict’s multifaceted reality. Moreover, “Denis Johnson is the poet laureate of the pathology of addiction” (McClure Smith 180), and *Jesus’* embodies the effect of a traumatic existence with the book’s abrupt mid-story transitions, mostly in the form of flashbacks. One example is found in the story “Work,” where the narrator abruptly transitions into a memory of an event he experienced with his first wife (although he never mentions or alludes to other wives), based on a loose association with the main storyline. Since flashbacks are typical to survivors of trauma, as was previously elucidated, the collection seems to exemplify the emotional state of the trauma survivor.

In conclusion, if modernist writers who “sought methods of capturing the many points of view that constitute objective reality . . . found a solution in the use of interlinked short stories” (March-Russell 103), Johnson’s *Jesus’* seems to seek the opposite, presenting the reader with a narrow viewpoint that constitutes a subjective reality. Johnson thus deploys the disjointed nature of interlinked stories to reflect the convoluted emotional and physical life of *Jesus’* characters. Moreover, while *Carried* and *Apples* both present the reader with relatively clear narratives as to who are the trauma perpetrators and who are its victims, in *Jesus’* these two groups are rather integrated. *Jesus’*, therefore, calls upon the reader to do emotional work to a greater degree than the other two books since both its narrator and its characters for that matter, generally exhibits a

lack of emotion despite being immersed in an unstable and perilous lifestyle. In this sense, Johnson uses the form of interlinked stories to a larger extent than O'Brien and Marcom by not only inviting the reader to create a whole from its parts but also to do the emotional work in the narrator's stead, since he cannot/does not respond emotionally to his traumatic experiences.

## **Part Two: UnBelonging**

While the highly subjective reality of *Jesus'* is exhibited in its disjointed and disordered stories, the subjective quality of the narrative is also represented by the book's vague locations. Although the stories sporadically include names of cities and states, highways, and streets, the general sense is that they are situated somewhere in America and the exact location is meaningless or not quite known to the narrator. Thus, the narrator moves through vague spaces, locations, and time periods as if in a dream and without grasping the meaning of what befalls him. The following passage of a car journey exhibits this sense of unreality, where the material world reshapes itself to the narrator's perspective: "You'd think the sky didn't have any air in it, and the earth was made of paper. Rather than moving, we were getting smaller and smaller" (40). What would otherwise have been a mundane drive through fields turns convoluted in the narrator's mind. As with dreams, the stories lack a concrete sense of place and time, and therefore, "without the existence of duration, objects reside simultaneously within the same space-time" (March-Russell 117). This simultaneity renders the book's locations into subjective spaces. As McClure Smith suggests, "the narrator's skewed perception perpetually remakes the world anew" (183). However, while exact locations appear meaningless, "each location establishes its own unique identity" (McClure Smith 183). And so the narrator tells us about stumbling into "a Polish neighborhood somewhere or other" (79) yet "Polish neighborhoods have that snow. They have that fruit with the light on it, they have that

music you can't find" (79). The blurred and the specific, even if made strange by a mind muddled by drugs and alcohol, reside simultaneously within the same space-time. The sense of dislocation is enabled and enhanced by the disjointed form of interlinked stories, delivering a vivid account of its narrator's mindset, environment, and routines.

In his seminal book *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*—published around the same time as *Jesus'*—Fredric Jameson describes the Nuclear Arms Race as “a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world: in this sense, as throughout class history, the underside of culture is blood, torture, death, and terror” (5). In other words, this wide cultural crisis (which peaked during the decade leading to the publication of these two books), resulted in a violence-related despondency. Alluding to this crisis, Lyons writes: “Johnson takes the reader into the recognizable grainy heartland of an America whose infrastructures are rotting. . . . The stories ask in different ways, What is worth salvaging of this landscape or of heartland America?” (193). Lyons refers to this rot as “Johnson's skag sublime—a fusion of dismembered terror, humor, and beauty flecked with sociopolitical allegory” (193). On the other hand, Timothy Parrish claims that “Johnson's fiction is unlikely to attract political readings not because an implicit critique of American culture cannot be derived from it, but because his ‘wasted’ characters are so blissfully ignorant of their existence as social creatures” (19). With the book's narrator generally exhibiting a lack of emotional involvement, these two opposing viewpoints seem equally possible; the seemingly apolitical characters can simultaneously invite apolitical readings, as well as a political ones. As the book's emotionally detached narrator moves through unspecified locations, interacting with drifting characters, the stories create a growing sense of alienation as they unfold, which is further enhanced by the unchronological storytelling. If “the break with chronology does not so much suggest liberation as

alienation” (March-Russell 115), then *Jesus*’ disorderly narratives represent its narrator’s alienation from himself, as well as from the world at large, an alienation that could be explained by his traumatic reality. When people are traumatized they feel abandoned, alone, cast out of human systems, and “a sense of alienation, of disconnection, pervades every relationship, from the most intimate familial bonds to the most abstract affiliations of community and religion. When trust is lost, traumatized people feel that they belong more to the dead than to the living” (Herman 52). The narrator’s ‘belonging to the dead’ is evident in his hazardous addiction and lifestyle, existing on the margin of society among similar characters—most of whom seem to be generally homeless, drifting between temporary residencies, some of which seem unsuitable for human dwelling. In other words, *Jesus*’ narrator, as well as most of the secondary characters, seems to embody the concept of ‘UnBelonging,’ i.e., a general sense of alienation from oneself and from others.

Wrapping together the concepts of ‘home’ and ‘belonging,’ Ileana Șor A Dimitriu writes that while the idea of ‘home’ denotes one’s place of birth, molding our sense of self and belonging, “Later in life, such a perception of home tends to be invested with an aura of nostalgia and be seen as emotional refuge and symbol of stability in a turbulent world” (271). I take this to mean that in the lack of nostalgic emotions toward a person’s place of birth, their sense of belonging might be destabilized and even fractured. Whether the sense of alienation in *Jesus*’ stems from the Nuclear Arms Race, or perhaps the massive globalization that has put “[c]onventional perceptions of home ... under insistent critical scrutiny” (Dimitriu 271), causing the world to change to the point that “domestic, national, or marked spaces no longer exist” (Dimitriu 272)—the stories’ pervading sense of UnBelonging accompanies the reader throughout the better part of the book. It is the disjointed nature of interlinked stories that facilitates and amplifies the feeling of

UnBelonging in *Jesus'*. Moreover, I find Johnson's choice of interlinked stories to be an appropriate form of representation of the socially marginal characters who inhabit the book, since this literary form is less common/conventional than the short story collection and the novel. It is worth noting that the other two books examined in this research also speak of UnBelonging, yet while the root causes in both *Carried* and *Apples* are clear and direct, the readers of *Jesus'* are left to guess the root causes of the narrator's addiction. The lack of clarity might in turn have the reader identify with the narrator whose life is engulfed by a haze of characters, events, and places.

### **Part Three: Repair**

If the first ten stories of *Jesus'* generate a sense of UnBelonging, its opposite—a sense of belonging—emerges from the book's concluding story. As with O'Brien and Marcom's books, *Jesus'* concluding story also brings the collection full circle and projects hope into the future. The budding sense of belonging is twofold: place and vocation.

“Beverley Home,” the title of the concluding story, holds a clue to the shift in the trajectory of the narrator as well as the story collection. With the narrator being a drifter, ‘home’ signified a clear departure from the stories’ previously undefined locations. While the sense of time and place in *Jesus'* is uncertain and confused, the final story grounds the narrator, and thus the reader, in a new environment: “The home lay in a cul-de-sac in east Phoenix, with a view into the desert surrounding the city. This was in the spring of that year, the season when some varieties of cactus produced tiny blossoms out of their thorns” (118). The short description holds many symbols: we have a specific location, time of year, and—out of the arid desert and its thorny cacti—new life blooms. Referring to Johnson, Philip Connors writes: “Here was a writer who'd gone to the dark side, deep into madness, and returned, somehow wiser and with his sense of humor intact” (252).

With *Jesus*' being based on Johnson's biography, it is no wonder the book's narrator seems to have taken a similar route to its author. The final story's specific time and place and the cacti blossoms represent the narrator's awakening; he is finally aware of his environment and appreciates what he sees.

The narrator's awakening is also manifested in his appreciation of what he encounters in the home itself. In the book's last story, the narrator informs us: "I was responsible for the facility's newsletter" (116). While he does seem dedicated to his new job, it is the nature of this vocation that is at the heart of his path to recovery, as it situates him in a new reality. This reality comprises the facility's inhabitants, the subjects of the newsletter—people who are "put out of sight" (*Jesus*' 116) due to their age, health, or deformations. In other words: outcasts. Like himself, perhaps. Part of his job is to touch the residents of the home. As the patients advance down the hall, he "walked against the tide . . . greeting everybody and grasping their hands or squeezing their shoulders, because they needed to be touched, and they didn't get much of it" (117). In this context, "I walked against the tide" (117) has a symbolic meaning: contrary to the narrator's previous state of emotional disconnect with himself, with others, and with his environment—where nothing, in effect, 'touched' him—he now figuratively advances in the opposite direction, offering kindness to strangers, and, or perhaps foremost, to himself—something he needs as much as they do. In other words, he seems to be on the path of emerging from his previous traumatic existence. While "The impact of a traumatic event continues to reverberate throughout the survivor's lifecycle," claims Judith Herman (211), and "the resolution is never complete, it is often sufficient for the survivor . . . to turn her attention . . . to the tasks of ordinary life [and] to engage fully in relationships with others" (212). The narrator thus seems to follow Herman's understanding of recovery from trauma, as incomplete as it might be. Another facet of the narrator's new ordinary life is writing.

A clue to his desired/unrealized vocation is provided in the penultimate story, “Steady Hands at Seattle General,” where he is hospitalized for detox, shifting away from his life as an addict. Describing himself as a writer when asked, he expresses a desire for direction and purpose. The tone in this story is clearer than that of the previous stories, setting the stage for the concluding story. Frank O'Connor writes that “in the short story there is this sense of outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society. . . . As a result, there is in the short story at its most characteristic something we do not often find in the novel—an intense awareness of human loneliness” (18-19). While Johnson stresses the narrator’s loneliness in the book’s first nine stories, in this penultimate story, the narrator makes a pivotal turn toward connectedness, a turn that is realized in the collection’s final story. An earlier hint to the narrator’s relationship with writing is given during a bus ride in which the driver tells him, “You can’t just sit on the bus. . . . You’ve got to have a destination” (99), and the narrator, having no specific destination in mind, chooses to get off at the library. Within the general chaos and indirection of his life, this seemingly random choice hints at his inclination toward literature.

If many of the book’s critics assert that the narrator’s recovery from his traumatic lifestyle/addiction is Redemption, leaning on the Christian imagery in the text, I concur with McClure Smith, who argues that “the stories are often unclear on issues of religious attribution” (59). Instead, he writes, they evolve spiritually “toward acknowledgment of a higher power” and “the higher power to which this narrator ultimately defers is language” (182-183). Even though the stories are not a religious text of sorts, explains McClure Smith, the writing offers salvation to its narrator who replaces his drug addiction with storytelling and uses Christian symbolism to redeem himself. Adding to McClure Smith’s argument, I would suggest that the narrator’s salvation also stems from reconnecting with his own humanity through compassionate acts toward

other outcasts, among whom he finds a home of a sort. In other words, he reconnects with his humanity via his vocation and the work of the writer in gathering fragments into some sort of a whole, even if a partial one.

As in *Carried* and *Apples*, here too the act of storytelling leads to some sense of repair, even if a tentative one. Another similarity to *Carried* and *Apples* is the sense of repair offered in the book's final story. If "catharsis for both narrator and reader [of *Jesus*'] occurs at the endpoint of a difficult process of recovery" (McClure Smith 180), the cathartic release in *Jesus*' closing story diffuses the book's disorienting effect as the narrator transitions from chaos and danger to stability and calm, provides a sense of tentative or partial repair, and strings the stories into a cohesive unit. In *Jesus*' concluding story the gap between the narrator's haphazard life and his understanding of it is finally bridged, inviting the reader to participate in the narrator's awakening sensation. Moreover, *Jesus*' closing words, akin to the final words in *Carried* and *Apples*, deliver the book's reparative effect: "All these weirdos, and me getting a little better every day right in the midst of them. I had never known, never even imagined for a heartbeat, that there might be a place for people like us" (133). If in the previous stories 'us' refers to addicts, outcasts, and criminals, in this final paragraph the narrator uses the word to describe his new community, which is also socially marginalized yet not self-destructive and hopeless. Moreover, it could be that by extension, the reader, participating in the work of putting the collection of fragments together, is also included in 'us.' Referring to this final paragraph, Lyons argues that "It is a measure of Johnson's reach in *Jesus' Son* that this fiercely inclusive inconclusion seems to weep, laugh, hope, despair, and care in its very gesture toward ironic distance" (195). While the stories are rife with ironic humor, the final story, and especially the concluding words, "a place for people like us," also carries a sense of identity and belonging at last, even if a frail one. Similar to *Carried* and



*Apples, Jesus'* also arrives at a narrative repair—or a narrative working through repair—that weaves the book's patchy storytelling into one fabric and finally settles the narrator (and thus the reader) in a particular time and place.

If “The short story breaks up the familiar life-world of the everyday, defamiliarizes our assumptions that reality is simply the conceptual construct we take it to be” (May 333), then the form of interlinked stories further stretches these qualities by breaking away from this reality, in which a “man looks at the world as that world in which he has to live and in which it is comfortable to live” (May 333). Utilizing the disjointed nature of interlinked stories, Johnson creates a disorienting experience for the reader by breaking up from familiar life-world assumptions while in the book's last story he does the opposite by settling the narrator, and thus the reader, in a specific time and place, and dispels the book's disorienting effect. And thus, similar to O'Brien and Marcom, Johnson also uses the form of interlinked stories to enhance and propel the traumatic elements of his book and to deliver a resonant repair as the collection draws to its conclusion.

#### Chapter Four: *Not That Far from Tel Aviv* and the Form of Interlinked Stories

This final chapter examines how my story collection, *Not That Far from Tel Aviv*, utilizes the form of interlinked stories to represent trauma as well as enable a sense of repair. The collection is centered around the character of Rona Hirsch, whose narratives incorporate memoir, autofiction, and fiction. While many of the stories involve Rona, the collection includes other characters that explore additional facets of the collection's themes. The stories entwine the autobiographical and the fictional, the realistic and the supernatural, the historical and the speculative, and it merges various time periods and a variety of styles and genre—an amalgamation that is facilitated by the disjointed nature of the form of interlinked stories, as has been previously explained in this essay. At the same time, the collection is unified by the themes of life in Israel, home/homeland, war, the Shoa, and intergenerational memory, as well as by a sense of UnBelonging.

Revolving around traumatic experiences of war, violence, and displacement, the stories are largely imbued with a sense of UnBelonging experienced by the narrator as well some of the other characters. To build on John K. Young's claim that war's unsettled/unsettling experiences are reflected in unstable texts, I suggest that trauma of war and violence can also result in an unstable sense of belonging, i.e., a prevailing sense of UnBelonging to one's home/homeland as well as in a residual sense of a character's Unbelonging to oneself. Moreover, if "the only way to truly represent trauma is in ways that represent the experience's unattainable elements" (Langdon 341), then the unattainable elements might include the effects of living with the consequences of trauma. Put another way, if O'Brien's "writing is true to the 'felt' experience of trauma" (Langdon 341), my story collection strives to be true to a possible effect of traumatic experiences: a sense of UnBelonging.

While the common thread that binds the stories is a sense of UnBelonging, the concluding story, “Berlin, Berlin”—after once more posing the question ‘where is home?’—presents a possible answer. If the narrator of Johnson’s book finds a tangible home among outcasts like himself, the main character of my collection finds an intangible home within herself: the stories she tells; her memories; the life that runs through her veins; her very breath. As in Johnson’s collection, *Tel Aviv* also offers a sense of inner peace, even if tentatively, as it draws to its end. Therefore, similar to the three books examined in this study, the concluding story of my collection also offers repair, or an attempt at repair since traumatic experiences could not be overturned or truly repaired. “Berlin, Berlin” is also what Lynch calls a story cycle’s ‘return story,’ by which he means a concluding story that functions to remind readers of earlier preoccupations while not necessarily offering a comfortable closure, “for although they may tempt with hints of resolution, they also destabilize” (527). Story cycles that include a ‘return story’ “return to their beginnings, or their elusive centres, without ever quite closing the circle or resting in a believable essence” (Lynch 527). Accordingly, “Berlin, Berlin” turns back to the storytelling materials more typical of the earlier parts—life/war in Israel, intergenerational trauma, and World War II—thus returning the reader to familiar (even if destabilizing) ground as the collection draws to an end.

The collection comprises six parts, where each encapsulates a topic that expands into the following part and builds on intertextuality, i.e., the stories and/or details within the stories are in dialogue with each other as some of the events and characters reappear in different contexts.

For example, while Rona’s participation in the story “Escape” is merely hinted, her involvement and possible influence on the story’s protagonist, is clarified in the following story, “Wish I Were a Lesbian.” Another example is “Round Table,” which is based on an idea suggested

in the preceding story, “Reflections on War,” of conducting dialogues between Israeli-Jews and Palestinians in the afterlife.

The overall arc of the six parts covers the various stages in Rona’s life, leading from childhood in the first part to young womanhood/soldier-hood in the second part, to discussing the fantasy/experience of emigration in the collection’s third part, to reflecting on war and its consequences in the fourth part and then focusing on the subject of home in the fifth part. While the first five parts of the collection are generally composed of autofictional materials and or/details, the majority of the sixth part consists of speculative narratives regarding the possible future of Israel. While my collection largely revolves around life in Israel, it also tries to imagine its future. The arrangement of the stories, however, is not necessarily well-ordered and the chronology is sometimes disrupted. For example, revolving around a desire to emigrate from Israel, the collection’s third part opens with the story “Untitled,” which occurs in England, one of the countries to which the narrator eventually emigrates. If the disjointed form of interlinked stories could reflect narratives of trauma, one of the effects exhibited in *Tel Aviv* is a disrupted reality/timeline, typical to those who have suffered traumatic events and experiences. Thus, my story collection attempts to counter the disruption by trying to control the overall narrative, group the stories, and organize them in chronological order. If trauma causes uncertainty, chaos, and disorder, the collection’s aspiration to control the organization of the narratives is a reparative gesture in terms of reversing things into a linear and (supposedly) controlled timeline. In other words, the attempt to organize the timeline/narratives is also an attempt at repair as it strives to counter the trauma-related disruption. The idea of trying to control time is highlighted in the story “The Machine,” where the narrator encounters a mysterious machine that sorts memories—kept in boxes labeled Childhood, Teenagerhood, Army, etc. —into lived experiences. However, when

the machine malfunctions, the narrator finds herself trapped in a convoluted and frightful reality. The story is placed in the sixth part of the collection, which (save for the final story) discusses the possible future of Israel, a placement that signifies the intention of presenting a jumbled order. “The Machine,” therefore, exhibits both a desire to control reality/timeline as well as the futility of such an attempt, and, by extension, the fragility and unreliability of memory. Or, in other words, in trying to create stability, “The Machine” ends up generating instability.

Inspired by O’Brien’s work, *Tel Aviv* oscillates between stability and instability, calm and chaos. The fluctuation—as was explained in the chapter about *Carried* regarding the stop-start procedure of warfare—reflects the intermittent routines of violence followed by the calm that is typical of combat. The disjointed nature of interlinked stories reflects and enhances a sense of instability, even if nuanced at times. Moreover, the concept of destabilized/fragmented selfhood of the author-narrator in O’Brien’s *Carried* as a representation of war-related destabilizing, inspired me in building the character of Rona Hirsch, who also fuses autobiographical and fictive details and narratives, thus fusing author and narrator. Asked in a PBS interview about writing *Carried* in a form of a memoir, the author said that this was part of his writing strategy: “I wanted to write a work of fiction that would feel to the reader as if this had occurred or, in a way, is occurring as I read it ... I was a soldier in Vietnam. But the stories in the book are, for the most part, invented. Yet, they’re launched out of a world I once knew” (Looking Back). Finding this strategy to be effective in creating an illusion of intimacy that is typical to a memoir, and therefore generally effective in arresting the reader’s attention, I have used it with the intention of having the reader feel what the narrator felt: the instability and uncertainty of someone who grew up in a war-stricken region and whose family experienced loss and displacement.

I also used O'Brien's method of having the main character reflect in some of the secondary characters—as he did with Norman Bowker and the dead Vietnamese soldier—thus further destabilizing the selfhood of the author-narrator in my collection. This destabilization, in turn, relates to the aforementioned sense of a character's UnBelonging to oneself since the boundaries between the narrator and some of the second characters are destabilized/blurred. Thus, the character of Rona Hirsch is linked with the character of Talia, who in turn is linked with the symbolic character of the young girl in the story “The End of Doubt,” who then points back to Rona as the story concludes. The technique is meant to destabilize the notion of a coherent central figure that leads the reader through the book, and the accretive intertextuality invites the reader to link narratives, characters, and details and participate in the process of creating meaning.

The construction of Rona Hirsch was guided by O'Brien's concept of ‘story-truth,’ i.e., transmitting the essence of the writer's experience by relaying both what truly happened as well as invented occurrences that help to clarify and explain. Thus, inserting fictional details, narratives, and characters into what is defined as life-writing helped me engage with, and narratively portray, loaded subject matters such as homeland, war, and genocide. Stories such as “Crushed,” “Wartime Diary,” and “The Ring” demonstrate the fusion of life-writing and fiction. If life-writing is “a generic term used to describe a range of writings about lives or parts of lives, or which provide materials out of which lives or parts of lives are composed” (Leader 1), the term is also used “in connection with the difficulties and inadequacies of conventional biography, a word which itself literally means ‘life-writing’” (Leader 1). The circularity points to the unclear/slippery boundaries of life-writing, which, in turn, relates to O'Brien's ‘story-truth’ that combines autobiographical and fictional occurrences. The circularity also points to Langdon's argument that “In their representations of trauma, the genres of life writing and fiction can sometimes intersect in ways

that arguably invalidate the traditional division between these categories” (341). The disjointed form of interlinked stories allows, and possibly advances, the unclear/invalidated boundaries between literary categories, thus creating an opportunity to explore the boundaries between life writing and fiction. Moreover, as Langdon explains regarding testimonial texts with historical accuracy, “A more complete picture of the past, then, is one inclusive of the ineffable—one in which elements of blankness, silence or lacuna are given shape or recognition” (342). I suggest that these elements, these narrative gaps, could sometimes be filled with fiction, as was largely demonstrated in Marcom’s *Apples*, where the author writes into the gaps in historical archives.

Extending the idea of filling narrative gaps/adding to historical archives, my story “What If” presents an alternative history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. A sequel to “Not That Far from Tel Aviv” and “The End of Doubt,” “What If” is loosely based on personal familiarity with some of Israel’s West Bank settlements as well as key members of the early settlement movement. Inspired by Marcom’s approach of writing into the gaps in historical archives, and further stretching the idea into uncharted territories, “What If” asks, as the title suggests, what might have happened if the Palestinians had accepted the 1947 UN resolution and established the state of Palestine in the West Bank. The use of autobiographical experiences in the construction of fictional/speculative stories echoes O’Brien’s point of ‘story-truth’ as opposed to ‘happening-truth,’ as well as Leigh Gilmore’s argument that “the limits of autobiography, multiple and sprawling as they are, might conspire to prevent some self-representational stories from being told at all if they were subjected to a literal truth test or evaluated by certain objective measures” (14). I suggest that furthering the argument is O’Brien’s claim that “it’s difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen. What seems to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way” (*Carried* 69-70). To that I would add: it is also difficult to separate what

happened from what *might* have happened, which then becomes its own happening and has to be told that way. For example, many of the scenes in my story “Wartime Diary” are adaptations of events that have happened during the story’s time period, i.e., the 2014 war between Israel and Hamas. Thus, the narrator imagining a missile falling on her neighborhood and the ensuing terror and chaos invites the reader to feel what those who are devastated by such horrors might feel. Or, as O’Brien puts it, “It comes down to gut instinct. A true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe” (*Carried* 75). This links to his other statement, “I want you to feel what I felt” (*Carried* 179).

To explain the difference between feeling the effect of war trauma versus learning about it intellectually, I return to O’Brien’s interview on PBS, where he said that for him,

[T]he way to approach a subject such as Vietnam is through storytelling. It’s one thing to watch a newscast or read a newspaper or a magazine article, where things are fairly abstract ... whereas my goal is to try to ... capture the heart and the stomach and the back of the throat of readers who can lie in bed at night and participate in a story. (Looking Back)

In other words, the readers’ participation in a war story is enabled by activating their emotions, thus having them viscerally relate to the story. The final scene in my story “Crushed” was composed with this intention in mind; after weaving a coming-of-age love fantasy, the narrator then invites the reader to feel the shock of learning the tragic fate of her love interest.

Another way to invite the reader to viscerally relate to a story is through humor. Or—as O’Brien demonstrates in some of his descriptions of death and injury suffered by his fellow soldiers—dark humor. My story, “Round Table,” which imagines the narrator’s grandmother in



the afterlife, was inspired by O'Brien's humor as well as his concept of the 'illusion of aliveness.' In his story "The Lives of the Dead," O'Brien states that "[T]hat's what a story does. The bodies are animated. You make the dead talk" (*Carried* 226). Placed in the afterlife and involving factual and fictive characters, details, and events in a seemingly mundane setting, "Round Table" corresponds with Ingram's argument that "Realistic detail does not disrupt symbolic intent. Rather, it enhances it" (21). I would further suggest, as I have done in chapter two of this essay, that the factual and the fictive have a mutually beneficial relationship that works to advance the scope of storytelling. By combining a seemingly realistic narrative with elements of fantasy/supernatural, "Round Table" strives to create an effect of a realistic dream, where the reader is invited into a recognizable reality imbued with peculiar details akin, for example, to the experience of wartime—one of the key themes in the story collection. "Round Table" was also inspired by Marcom's *Apples*, which includes dead characters and combines fact and fiction, often in the same story as we see in "Rachel Eskijian, B. 1900, A Catholic Girl." In the story, Rachel, a character of a dead girl, mentions the photos taken by the historical figure of Leslie Davis, the U.S. consul who documented the Armenian Genocide—thus illuminating the technique of weaving together historical fact with the supernatural. With the protagonist and some of the secondary characters of "Round Table" presented in earlier stories, the story is an example of the 'story installation' idea discussed in chapter two, since the comprehension of "Round Table" relies on the reader's knowledge from various other narratives. The form of interlinked stories, where the stories are presented separately, invites the reader to juxtapose narratives to create meaning.

Moreover, implementing the idea of having the factual flows into the fictional and vice versa, as well as Marcom's centering her story collection around her grandmother's experience during the Armenian Genocide, I entwined personal, autofictional, and filial narratives to embody the

concept of intergenerational trauma. For example, remembering and documenting family-related trauma are at the heart of my stories “Mainly Against Forgetting” and “The Ring.” Also, similar to Marcom’s *Apples*, the stories in my collection are not all stand-alone. As in *Apples*, my fragmented storytelling represents the disjointed memory that often typifies trauma survivors, yet it also offers a sense of repair when the stories work collectively to create a whole, even if a tentative one. Another shared commonality with Marcom’s work is the transition between first- and third-person narrative voice. Using such transitions enables the stories to present different viewpoints by shifting from the narrow perspective of the first-person narrator to the wider view of the omnipresent narrator. Both techniques of blurring boundaries between characters and shifting the narration viewpoint represent the instability caused by unsettling/traumatic experiences: the narrating voice is not set/unified, and the stories are thus imbued with a sense of UnBelonging to represent a possible consequence of trauma.

In conclusion, the close reading of the three examined story collections, as well as the critical readings involved in this thesis, has illuminated and augmented elements in the creation of my story collection, namely the relationship between the form of interlinked stories and narratives of trauma. Thus, the research has expanded the scope of my storytelling and enriched the dynamic of the individual stories as well as the collection as a whole.

## Conclusion

This thesis seeks to address the relationship between the literary form of interlinked stories and narratives of trauma, arguing that the disjointed nature of the form is particularly suited to deliver impactful narratives of trauma. Examined through three collections of interlinked stories—*The Things They Carried*, *Three Apples Fell from Heaven*, and *Jesus' Son*—the relationship between the form and narratives of trauma is found to both reflect and augment the disrupted reality of those who have suffered traumatic events and experiences. The books' nonlinear/disrupted narratives mirror the work of prominent trauma theorists such as the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, who claimed that trauma causes temporal disruption, and Roger Luckhurst, who argued that trauma narratives cannot be relayed in a linear way.

As this study shows, each of the three books displays a different relationship between the form and narratives of trauma, yet they all demonstrate techniques of fragmentation, informational gaps, and chronological disorder. Likewise, each of the books concludes with a resonant story that conveys survival and hope, delivering a narrative repair, even if a tentative one, and stringing the disrupted and chaotic storytelling into a more cohesive unit. While the traumatic events and experiences presented in these books—be it warfare, genocide, or addiction—could never be rectified or truly repaired, these tentative repairs offset, even if partially, the sense of chaos and crisis, brokenness and despair that run through the stories.

My creative project, a collection of interlinked stories titled *Not That Far from Tel Aviv*, was informed and inspired by the close reading of the three collections of interlinked stories examined in this study, as well as the critical readings involved in this thesis. While my critical research

strives to open a window into a curious relationship between form and content, my creative project looks for new ways to relay narratives of trauma using the form of interlinked stories.

The two parts of my thesis—the critical research and the creative project—have benefited from a relationship of cross-pollination. As my analysis of the three books and the related critical essays deepened my understanding of the form, my creative process has broadened, and as a result, the scope of my story collection has also widened. Moreover, critically researching the themes of future creative projects is now part of my writing practice, which will be significant for my future writing projects.

## Works Cited

- Abbott, H. Porter. *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*. Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Adalian, Rouben Paul. *Armenian National Institute*. [armenian-genocide.org/genocide.html](http://armenian-genocide.org/genocide.html).  
Accessed July 1, 2020.
- Arango, Tim. "A Century After Armenian Genocide, Turkey's Denial Only Deepens." *The New York Times*. April 16, 2015. [nytimes.com/2015/04/17/world/europe/turkeys-century-of-denial-about-an-armenian-genocide.html](http://nytimes.com/2015/04/17/world/europe/turkeys-century-of-denial-about-an-armenian-genocide.html). Accessed July 22, 2020.
- Arango, Tim. "'Sherlock Holmes of Armenian Genocide' Uncovers Lost Evidence." *The New York Times*. April 22, 2017. [nytimes.com/2017/04/22/world/europe/armenian-genocide-turkey.html](http://nytimes.com/2017/04/22/world/europe/armenian-genocide-turkey.html). Accessed July 7, 2020.
- Arnold-de Simine, Silke. "Trauma and Memory." *Trauma and Literature*, edited by Roger Kurtz, Cambridge University Press, 2018, 140-152.
- Avagyan, Shushan. "Interview with Micheline Aharonian Marcom." *Context N°22*. Via email correspondence June 17 and July 15, 2008. [dalkeyarchive.com/interview-with-micheline-aharonian-marcom](http://dalkeyarchive.com/interview-with-micheline-aharonian-marcom). Accessed December 20, 2019.
- Avakian, Anne. "Three Apples Fell from Heaven." *Folklore*, vol. 98, no. 1, 1987, 95-98.
- Blood, Liz. "An Interview with Micheline Aharonian Marcom." Awst Press, September 27, 2017. [awst-press.com/news/interview-with-micheline-aharonian-marcom](http://awst-press.com/news/interview-with-micheline-aharonian-marcom)\_Accessed December 20, 2019.
- Caruth, Cathy. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* [ed]. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995.
- Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.

- Castellucci Cox, Karen. "Magic and Memory in the Contemporary Story Cycle: Gloria Naylor and Louise Erdrich." *College English*, vol. 60, No. 2, 1998, 150-172.
- Connors, Philip. "Denis Johnson's Higher Power." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 43:1, 2008, 17-29.
- Davis, Leslie A. *The Slaughterhouse Province: An American Diplomat's Report on the Armenian Genocide, 1915-1917*. Aristide d Caratzas Publishing, 1989.
- D'hoker, Elke. "The new Dubliners: Contemporary Irish short story Cycles." *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, vol. 42, 2019, 100-113.
- Dimitriu, Ileana Șora. "Literary Representations of Home, Belonging and Unbelonging in Amamanda Adichie's 'Migrant Bildungsroman', Americanah." *B.A.S: British and American Studies* vol. XXVII, 2021. 271-281.
- Dix Hywel. "Autofiction: The Forgotten Face of French Theory." *Word and Text A Journal of Literary Studies and Linguistics*, Vol. VII 69 – 85, 2017.
- Dunn, Maggie; Ann Morris. *The Composite Novel: The Short Story Cycle in Transition*. Twayne Publishers; Macmillan, 1995.
- Felman, Shoshana. "In an Era of Testimony: Claude Lanzmann's Shoah." *Yale French Studies* 79 39–81, 1991.
- Felman Shoshana, and Dori Laub. *Testimony: crises of witnessing in literature, psychoanalysis, and history*. Routledge, 1991.
- Gilmore, Leigh. *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*. Cornell University Press, 2001.
- Heberle Mark. *A Trauma Artist: Tim O'Brien and the Fiction of Vietnam*. University of Iowa Press, 2001.

- Herman, Judith. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence— from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. Basic Books, 2015.
- Hirsch, Marianne. *The Generation of Postmemory Book Subtitle: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*. Columbia University Press, 2012.
- Hoffman, Eva. *After such knowledge: memory, history, and the legacy of the Holocaust*. Public Affairs/The Perseus Books Group, 2005.
- Hunter, Anna. “The Holocaust as the Ultimate Trauma Narrative.” .” *Trauma and Literature*, edited by Roger Kurtz, Cambridge University Press, 2018, 66-82.
- Ingram, Forrest L. *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century: studies in a literary genre*. Mouton & Co. N.V, 1971
- Jacoby, Jeff. “Denying the Armenian genocide.” *The New York Times*. Aug. 23, 2007  
[nytimes.com/2007/08/23/opinion/23iht-edjacoby.1.7227486.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/23/opinion/23iht-edjacoby.1.7227486.html). Accessed July 7, 2020.
- Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Duke University Press, 1991.
- Jensen, Meg. *The Art and Science of Trauma and the Autobiographical: Negotiated Truths*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.
- Johnson, Denis. *Jesus' Son*. Granta Books, 2012.
- Kaplan, Steven. “The Undying Uncertainty of the Narrator in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*.” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 35, no. 1, 1993, 43-52.
- Kardiner, Abram. *The Traumatic Neuroses of War*. Hoeber, 1941.
- Krist, Gary. “Innovation without Tears.” *The Hudson Review*, vol. 43, no. 4, 1991, 691-698.
- Krikorian, Michael. “Feeling Wronged, She Did Write.” *Los Angeles Times*. July 6, 2001.

- latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2001-jul-06-cl-19035-story.html. Accessed December 22, 2019.
- Kurtz, J. Roger. "Introduction." *Trauma and Literature*, Cambridge University Press, 2018, 1-17.
- LaLonde, Suzanne. "Healing and Post-Traumatic Growth." *Trauma and Literature*, edited by Roger Kurtz, Cambridge University Press, 2018, 196-210.
- Leader, Zachary. *On Life-Writing*. Edited by Zachary Leader. Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Langdon, Jo. "A Thing May Happen and be a Total Lie': Artifice and Trauma in Tim O'Brien's Magical Realist Life Writing." *Life Writing*, Vol. 14, No. 3, 341–355, 2017.
- Levy, Michele. "Three Apples Fell from Heaven." *World Literature Today*, 76:2, 2002, p. 152.
- Livesey, Margot. "Ghost Story: A first novel draws on many voices to recount the Armenian genocide." *The New York Times*. April 22, 2001.
- movies2.nytimes.com/books/01/04/22/reviews/010422.22liveset.html. Accessed February 2, 2020.
- Luckhurst, Roger. *The Trauma Question*. Routledge, 2008.
- Lynch, Gerald. "Short Story Cycles: Between the Novel and the Story Collection." *The Cambridge History of the English Short Story*, Edited by Dominic Head, Cambridge University Press, 2016, 513-529.
- Lyons, Paul. "Jesus' Son by Denis Johnson." *Mānoa*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1993, 193-195.
- Maksudyan, Nazan. *Ottoman Children and Youth during World War I*. Syracuse University Press, 2019.
- Mann, Susan. *The Short Story Cycle*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1989.
- March-Russell, Paul. *The Short Story*. Edinburgh University Press, 2009.
- Marcom, Micheline Aharonian. *Three Apples Fell from Heaven*. Riverhead Books, 2001.



- May, Charles E. "The Nature of Knowledge in Short Fiction." *Studies in Short Fiction*, vol. 21, issue 4, 1984.
- McCarron, Kevin. "'The Crack-House Flicker': The Sacred and the Absurd in the Short Stories of Dennis Cooper, Dennis Johnson, and Thom Jones." *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, vol. 84, no. 1, 2008), 251-257.
- McClure Smith, Robert. "Addiction and Recovery in Denis Johnson's Jesus' Son." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 42:2, 2001, 180-191.
- McLoughlin, Kate. *Authoring War: The Literary Representation of War from the Iliad to Iraq*. Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- Nomura, Koki. "Symbolic Aesthetics in Tim O'Brien's "'The Man I Killed.'" *Short Story*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2008, 87-95.
- O'Brien, Tim. "Looking Back at the Vietnam War with Author, Veteran Tim O'Brien." *PBS*, April 28, 2010. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/looking-back-at-the-vietnam-war-with-author-veteran-tim-obrien>. Accessed June 25, 2023.
- O'Brien, Tim. *The Things They Carried*. Harper Collins, 1991.
- O'Connor, Frank. *The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story*. Melville House Publishing, 2004.
- Pagan, Amanda. *New York Public Library*. <https://www.nypl.org/blog/2018/10/18/brief-history-gothic-horror>. Accessed May 18, 2003.
- Parrish, Timothy. "Denis Johnson's Jesus' Son: To Kingdom Come." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 43:1, 2001, 17-29.
- Pasternak, Donna. "Keeping the Dead Alive: Revising the Past in Tim O'Brien's War Stories." *Irish Journal of American Studies*, vol. 7, 1998, 41-54.

- Pederson, Joshua. "Trauma and Narrative." *Trauma and Literature*, edited by J. Roger Kurtz, Cambridge University Press, 2018, 97-109.
- Schwab, Gabriele. *Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2010.
- Silbergleid, Robin. "Making Things Present: Tim O'Brien's Autobiographical Metafiction." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 50, no. 1, 2009, 129-155.
- Slopen, Beverley. "PW Interviews Alice Munro." *Publishers Weekly*. August 22, 1986, p. 76.
- "Three Apples Fell from Heaven by Micheline Aharonian Marcom." *Kirkus Review*. April 23, 2001. [kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/micheline-aharonian-marcom/three-apples-fell-from-heaven](http://kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/micheline-aharonian-marcom/three-apples-fell-from-heaven). Accessed December 23, 2019.
- Timmerman, John H. "Tim O'Brien and the Art of the True War Story: 'Night March' and 'Speaking of Courage'". *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 46, no. 1, 2000, 100-114.
- Van der Kolk, Bessel A. *The Body Keeps The Score; mind, brain and body in the transformation of trauma*. Penguin Books, 2014.
- Vickroy, Laurie. *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction*. University of Virginia Press, 2002.
- Vilain, Philippe. *The Novelist's Lexicon: Writers on the Words That Define Their Work*, Ed. Villa Gillet and Le Monde. Columbia University Press, 2010.
- White, Edward. "The Great Crime." *The Paris Review*, February 3, 2017. <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2017/02/03/the-great-crime/>. Accessed January 2, 2023.
- Young, John K. *How to Revise a True War Story: Tim O'Brien's Process of Textual Production*. University of Iowa Press, 2017.

Zaleski, Jeff. "Three Apples Fell from Heaven." *Publishers Weekly*. March 26, 2001, p. 62.