Chapter 1: Introduction—How (not) to Tell a True Ghost Story

This is true. Tim O’Brien’s “How to Tell a True War Story,” a pivotal chapter in *The Things They Carried* and his defining statement of the kinds of possible truth in narratives of wartime trauma, in the end “wasn’t a war story. It was a love story” (*Things* 81; original emphasis). What had seemed all along a metafiction about the impossibility of telling a “true” war story, offering instances of that genre only to disclaim their veracity, takes another turn on its final page, reframing the foregoing material as really about love after all, even if “you can’t say that” (81) to the typical reader. By recasting the text’s central example, Curt Lemon’s accidental death and its continuing effects on his friend Rat Kiley, as a love story, O’Brien shifts the narrative emphasis away from the random horrors of war and toward the unrelenting pain of loss, here figured as evidence of a soldier’s love. These are closely related conclusions, of course, but this metatextual turn suggests the possibility of broader misreadings, of other war stories in *Things* or elsewhere in O’Brien’s œuvre that, on more careful inspection, might present themselves as love stories instead, or at least as not only war stories. And actually, this story does not even stop there, suggesting in its final paragraph that “a true war story is never about war” but instead “about sunlight,” or “about love and memory,” or “about sorrow,” all the way to its well-known closing line: “It’s about sisters who never write back and people who never listen” (81). As a (true?) love story, then, the text becomes finally as much about the presence of love and loss as about the failure of such stories’ comprehension to anyone outside the immediate circumstances of the war. Because the story’s contents are so difficult to pin down, they are malleable and portable, yielding a potentially endless series of narrative occasions: “You can tell a true war story if you just keep on telling it” (81).

From there, the generic tension between war and love stories opens out into *The Things They Carried*, which is replete with the death of love, from the letters the lieutenant keeps and that are signed “Love, Martha” (2), though “they were not love letters” (1); to the dissolution of a soldier’s relationship with his high school girlfriend, when she comes to Viet Nam and disappears after joining the
Green Berets; to another GI’s insistence on carrying his girlfriend’s stockings around his neck as a talisman even after she has “dumped him” (112); to O’Brien’s mournful recollection of his dead childhood love, Linda; and in many other places along the way. More broadly, this narrative pattern—soldiers’ responses to the random and inescapable violence of war as grounded in the seeming impossibility of “true” love—might well define this period of O’Brien career, especially as it motivates the events of In the Lake of the Woods (1994), the novel he temporarily abandoned while writing Things, or as it shapes the alternating sections of “The Vietnam in Me,” O’Brien’s essay of the same year that pairs his return to Viet Nam with his overwhelming depression at the break-up of his first significant relationship after his divorce. In Lake, John Wade’s actions, including his reluctant participation in the My Lai massacre, seem to derive from his limitless need for what he perceives as love, in the paternal relationship cut off by his father’s suicide and in his marriage, when he “wanted to open up Kathy’s belly and crawl inside and stay there forever” (71), a disturbing image that recalls O’Brien’s young love for Linda, when he “wanted to live inside her body” (Things 216). Given this connection and a host of others, we might well seize upon the opposition between war and love stories as a generative tension for much of O’Brien’s fiction, especially in its representations of traumatic memory as both rooted in the almost unnarratable specificity of individual wartime experiences and yet as also deeply connected to the psychic wounds created by love and its loss.

But you can’t say that. Beginning to end, that’s not the entire story of what has happened with this text. And even if it did happen that way in The Things They Carried, it’s not quite the same story in the October 1987 Esquire, where “True War Story” was first published, and where various aspects of that text are different, including the line about the love story, which reads in the magazine, “It wasn’t a war story. It was a love story. It was a ghost story” (215). You can tell a true war story if you just keep on revising it. Indeed, from the typescripts and page proofs for Things, housed in the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas, to the magazine texts of many chapters, to the
several revised editions that have followed the first printing, this key work of American postmodern fiction has existed in multiple published and unpublished versions. The “ghost story” line only appears in the magazine version, and, presumably, in earlier working papers for Things that O’Brien destroyed long before the Ransom Center acquired his archive in 2007. This revision is one of thousands in the course of O’Brien’s career, but, as I will argue in this book, his inveterate revising is not simply a matter of reworking a text for the sake of cosmetic improvements. Rather, the types of revisions I will pursue are those expressing a contested cultural background, where the root cause of textual change seems to derive from O’Brien’s ongoing struggle to record unsettled, traumatic memories and experiences in texts that are themselves materially unstable, their implicitly unﬁnished textual condition leaving O’Brien, his works, and their readers without the sense of narrative or editorial resolution that would finally deny the underlying truths of his fictions.

O’Brien is, to be sure, an “endless tweaker,” and many of his pre- and post-publication revisions fall into the category of “adjust[ing] things” (Birnbaum 170), or what the editorial theorist John Bryant designates as “ongoing tinkering” versus “momentous reconceptualizing” (Fluid 73). O’Brien describes

1 “Now I wish, like Norman Mailer, that I had saved all that stuff,” O’Brien remarked in a telephone interview with me. Based on the documentary evidence of the Esquire story, an early typescript containing and/or deleting the “ghost story” line would function as what John Bryant calls an “inferred version” (Fluid 88). For a further discussion of such versions, see Bryant, Unfolding 46-50.

2 In this sense my work on O’Brien corresponds to Bryant’s tracing of the “delta function” savage/islander/native across various versions of Typee (Fluid 98), as this revision strategy similarly presents a “sign of a culture’s deepest ambivalencies” (6). As Lars Bernaerts and Dirk Van Hulle argue more broadly, records of textual genesis—and I would add post-publication variants—present an invaluable record for narratological analysis generally.

3 Bryant here draws on and responds to Tanselle’s distinction between “vertical” and “horizontal” types of revision, which either ultimately “produce a new work” or “develop and improve the original conception” of the existing work (“Problem” 58). See also Tanselle, Rationale 81-2. O’Brien scholars have occasionally addressed examples of his revision practices, most notably Catherine Calloway, Mark A. Heberle, Tobey C. Herzog, Steven Kaplan, T.J. Lustig, and Mats Tegmark. As Herzog notes in his 1997 Twayne biography (citing Kaplan’s 1995 discussion as well), “O’Brien tenaciously revises his prose, whether for the first edition or for a later edition, to the point where he scrutinizes every word and mark of punctuation” (23). But Herzog and other critics aware of such changes have been able to find them only in the variations between published editions, in most cases working well before there was any archival material available at the Ransom Center, and so have misread O’Brien’s recurrent revising as only that, a habit of reworking until “he can be satisfied with the ﬁnal result” (Ciocia 14). Other than Sarah Funke Butler’s brief online piece for the Paris Review, no one has delved into the pre-publication versions for comparison. Until the advent of scholarly editions, it will be impossible for O’Brien’s readers (aside from those journeying to
his revision process as “endless” (J. Smith 47), and rejects the premise that a text is ever settled or finished. “When I reread a book and find things that strike me as less than I would hope for,” he told me in a 2012 interview, “I don’t feel any compunction at all about making changes.” For the 2009 Mariner edition of Things, for example, O’Brien made a number of relatively minor changes to “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” and “The Ghost Soldiers,” including such adjustments in the latter story as: 4 “You could actually peel off chunks of skin <fillets of meat> with your fingernail” (181); “Ghosts wiping out a whole Marine platoon <squad of Marines> in twenty seconds flat” (195); “Tiny sounds get weird <heightened> and distorted” (195); “It’s like <as if> you’re in a movie” (197); “I heard myself laugh <chuckle>” (198); “There was no world <There was nothing moral in the world>” (200); “Azar said softly <cheerfully>” (201); “he shook his head and smiled <began marching out toward the wire>” (205); “‘Sorriest fuckin’ case <specimen> I ever seen’” (206); “His eyes had the opaque, polished <spiritless> surface of stone” (206); and “Jorgensen smiled <gave me a half-grin>” (207). Or, to cite a few examples from O’Brien’s other best-known work, Going After Cacciato: at three points on the galleys for the 1988 edition, O’Brien replaced “zipping” or “unzipped” with “buttoning up” or “unbuttoned,” in order to correct his “faulty memory” of Army pants (HRC 2.6; Interview). 5 Similarly, when proofreading the novel in January 1986 for a new edition, O’Brien deleted several uses of the word “murmured,” replacing it with “said,” “said quietly,” “whispered,” or even in one case “said loudly” (HRC 2.3), in response to his feeling that the original verbal cluster had created “a dead spot in reading” (Interview). Finally, the textual references to Paul Berlin alternate between his rank as a Private First Class or a Specialist 4th Class or “Spec Four.” In the Esquire story “The Fisherman” he is a Spec Four (the Army rank immediately above PFC), but a PFC in the corresponding chapter in the novel’s first edition, and then back to a Spec

Austin) to explore the full depth of his revisions, though I present here what I have found to be the most significant.

4 Here and throughout this book, cross-throghs indicate deletions and bracket indicate insertions.
5 This is the notation system I will use throughout this book, referring to the folder (here 15) and box (9) numbers in the Harry Ransom Center (HRC) collection of O’Brien’s papers.
Four in the Laurel reprint. The typescript for this chapter in the novel refers consistently to “Paul Berlin” without a rank, but O’Brien explained to me that these ongoing revisions were a matter of sound and specificity of description: “‘Spec Four Paul Berlin’ sounds to me more memorable than just ‘Paul Berlin.’ I like the sound of it; it succeeds in being part of the diction of the book. ‘Paul Berlin’ encompasses who he is in his civilian life, but ‘Spec Four Paul Berlin’ is part of the war” (Interview).

Many of O’Brien’s revisions of this type seem to have originated in his public readings, in which he takes note of a word or phrase that seems newly awkward, and presumably responds as well to the inevitable departures from a written text in its oral delivery (Birnbaum 170). But this revisionary restlessness also extends back to the process of composition, as O’Brien explains to Jack Smith: “I revise as I write. I might rework a sentence 10 times, 15 times, or even, in occasional cases, a hundred times. And then, having finally locked the sentence down, I’ll move on to the next sentence, and the same wrestling match will begin anew” (47). While these changes are all worth noting, especially for an eventual edition of O’Brien’s works, and in some cases they make subtle but significant impacts on plot or characterization, they are not the kinds of revision on which I focus in this book. My emphasis instead is on key moments of textual change, from which larger interpretive consequences follow. These revisions run the gamut from variations on a single word—whether a dead North Vietnamese woman in O’Brien’s memoir, If I Die in a Combat Zone, will be referred to as a “gook,” “woman,” or “dink”—to the deletion of entire chapters, as in the removal of “The Real Mary Anne” from early typescripts for Things, where it would have followed “Sweetheart,” and insisted on the seemingly far-fetched war story as actually verifiable. These kinds of revision open up alternative versions of O’Brien’s works, enabling counterfactual readings of the stories that have been published in contrast to those that might have

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6 In O’Brien’s own reading of “The Vietnam in Me,” for instance, originally recorded for audible.com and included on the audiobook of Things, which is read otherwise by Bryan Cranston, there are perhaps a dozen changes in the oral text, such as the My Lai “massacre” called the “famous massacre,” or “Chip” Merricks becoming “my friend Chip” in the audio version.
been. This refusal of textual stability, what I will outline as a traumatic textuality that manifests across O’Brien’s patterns of revision, importantly echoes for his editorially attuned readers the experience of the American war in Viet Nam, both during and long after the official end of that conflict. Like the inherently unstable, recursive, resistant, traumatic memories of the war, O’Brien’s revised and always revisable stories confront their readers not with the smooth sailing of a stable and singular text, but with the “muddy materiality of revision” (Bryant, “Where” 148). Throughout *How to Tell Revise a True War Story*, I ask what interpretive difference it would make to read one version of a traumatic text or another, but I ultimately approach all versions collectively, in order to chart their mutual interactions as they mirror readers’ fragmented, unsettled, and fluid encounters with these works. I argue that the only true readings of O’Brien’s traumatized texts are those that recognize the depths to which material form fits narrative function: readings sticking to the apparently stable surface of O’Brien’s fictions miss the turbulent eddies below, where the real story begins. By tracing O’Brien’s processes of revision, both before and after publication, I demonstrate that the story-truth of textual possibility more authentically represents the experience of wartime trauma than the happening-truth of a particular version encountered in isolation. In a true war story, “the only certainty is absolute <overwhelming> ambiguity” (“How” 214, *Things* 78, HRC 15.7); in a revised true war story, the only certainty is absolute overwhelming variability.

Here, then, is a brief survey of notable revisions across the span of O’Brien’s career, the tip of the iceberg; I return to some of these examples in much greater detail in the chapters that follow, including the changes in *If I Die* noted above (see Chapter 2). *Northern Lights*, O’Brien’s first novel, displays various substantial deletions in its typescripts, as in a lengthy scene at the end of the first “Elements” section when Paul Perry returns to his house after a revealing conversation with a drunken Jud Harmor and finds that his wife, Grace, is upstairs in the bath. The typescript version thus closes not with the published novel’s declaration from Jud to Paul that “we’re all of us heroes, even you” (92) but
with Paul’s perception of Grace: “She stopped singing and the house rattled in silence <went quiet>”
(HRC 11.6), a change that redirects Paul’s focus from the problem of his own “heroism” to those more
directly impacting his marriage. Going After Cacciato, in its early published editions, at one point implied
that Cacciato had died rather than gone AWOL, a vestige of O’Brien’s own indecision while drafting the
novel (see Chapter 3). The typescripts for The Nuclear Age, O’Brien’s next novel, display extensive cuts
throughout the typescript in thick, black marker, as in the opening line of Chapter 6, “Like hide-and-go-
seek <--> the future curves toward the past, then folds back again, seamlessly, always
expressing itself in the present tense” (HRC 12.5), where it is impossible to divine the original passage
that has been crossed out, but the intensity of the strike-throughs suggest substantial reconceptions of
the narrative from one stage of its development to another. The Things They Carried went through
multiple arrangements of its contents, incorporating an earlier version of “Speaking of Courage” that
had been removed from Cacciato and eventually suppressing the “Real Mary Anne” chapter, which
would have insisted on “Sweetheart” as a rare instance of historically verifiable happening-truth in that
book (see Chapters 4 and 5). John Wade’s Army unit assignment shifted from Bravo to Charlie Company
between an earlier story in the Atlantic Monthly and Lake, thus relocating from a village adjacent to the
My Lai massacre, where American soldiers also shot numerous Vietnamese civilians on March 16, 1968,
to the site of the war’s most notorious event (see Chapter 6). Henry Chippering’s estranged wife in
Tomcat in Love was originally not Lorna Sue but Mary Jean, a name that would not have activated a
range of other associations by recalling the “first girl that O’Brien fell in love with, a nine-year-old named
Lorna Lou” (Heberle, Artist xxiii). Finally, several chapters from O’Brien’s last book (so far), July, July,

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7 This is the version retained in the novel’s published version (98).
8 The character is still Mary Jean in “Faith,” the one excerpt from Tomcat published in advance, but is renamed
Lorna Sue in the first and all subsequent editions. In an interview with Lynn Wharton, O’Brien also describes a set
of early drafts in which the veterans pursuing Chippering throughout his postwar life would be revealed as
specters of his imagination, but removed this material on his editor’s advice for fear it would prove too confusing
to readers (130).
underwent various bibliographic and linguistic changes in their earlier publications in *Esquire* and *The New Yorker*, compelling distinct readings in response to each bibliographical environment (see Chapter 7). The O’Brien papers are typical, then, in consisting of “the coincidental combination of lacuna and plethora of textual material that has survived” (Shillingsburg, “Editions” 77).

While I examine these and many other revision sites, in Bryant’s terms, throughout this book, I offer nothing like a comprehensive account of O’Brien’s revisionary practices. That would be the provenance of eventual scholarly editions and, I hope, of additional textual scholarship focused on O’Brien that might follow my own. Nor is there room here to present a detailed accounting of the archival materials in Texas; no doubt future scholars working with this material will discover entirely new questions to ask. Briefly, then, the O’Brien papers at the Ransom Center include: for each of his books, typescripts, page proofs, production materials, and related professional correspondence, in addition to research notes and other items in some cases; large bulks of fan mail and other personal correspondence; literary contracts and royalty statements; interviews, reviews, and lectures; a baby book; clippings and other items from his days at Macalester College, the Army, and Harvard, as a graduate student in government; letters from Lorna Lue Moeller’s mother, who recognized her deceased daughter in “The Lives of the Dead”; O’Brien’s own childhood stories, penned in response to that tragedy; screenplays based on O’Brien’s works; copies of many (but by no means all) of O’Brien’s periodical publications; caches of photographs; military medals and a uniform, among various other categories. There is, in short, a wealth of archival wonders waiting to be discovered in Austin. Scholars who travel to the Ransom Center will not find, however, the earliest versions of any of O’Brien’s works—no handwritten drafts, no diaries or journals with early forays into a text whose published versions we

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9 For Bryant revision sites are not specific locations of textual change in a manuscript or other document, but editorial reconstructions of such changes, as he maintains that “the material evidence of revision exists only in the revision sites we perceive after collating one version of a work against another” (“Rewriting” 1044). I discuss revision sites at greater length in Chapters 2 and 3.

10 On these letters and stories, see also Butler, “Document.”
can find glimmers of on a yellowing page. Nor are the page proofs for O’Brien’s latest revised editions, paperback reprints issued by Broadway and Mariner Books, housed at the Ransom Center, at least not as of my last visit in the fall of 2014. Presumably those will arrive one day, but the earliest materials seem gone for good.

Returning briefly to my opening example and its interpretive consequences: the surviving archival record does not enable an explanation of exactly when or why O’Brien removed “It was a ghost story” from the book version of Things, either on his own or in consultation with his editor at Houghton Mifflin, so all we know is that at one time this sentence was a part of the text, and afterwards was not. But we can still account interpretively for this bibliographic phantom by considering this text as a “ghost story” and as a ghost story, reading the magazine version through this line’s presence and the book versions in accordance with its absence. As both a love story and a ghost story, the magazine text emphasizes its hauntedness, as the deaths of O’Brien’s comrades, especially Kiowa, his closest friend in the company, merge with the Vietnamese soldier O’Brien may have killed and the childhood friend felled by cancer, in the service of a narrative that both struggles to escape these spectral presences and to strike back at the reality of death through fiction, so that, as Linda tells O’Brien in a dream, her death is not irrevocable but simply “like being inside a book that nobody’s reading” (232).

Just as the shift from a war story to a love story seems in keeping with broader tendencies in O’Brien’s work, rereading this text as a ghost story opens up a similarly wide range of interpretive possibilities. To think of the narratives that have circulated in pieces throughout “True War Story”—the death of Curt Lemon in the “ragged green mountains” of Viet Nam (“How” 210) and Rat Kiley’s tortured and violent reaction to the loss of his friend, along with Mitchell Sanders’s account of a reconnaissance patrol stranded amidst an eerie mission—as both a love story and a ghost story would follow the broader narrative dynamics at work here. In one of several passages describing the properties of true war stories, for instance, O’Brien advises that “war has the feel—the spiritual texture—of a great ghostly
fog, thick and permanent” (214). Clearly Lemon’s death haunts the story’s narrator as well, who reports, “It happened nearly twenty years ago, but I still remember that trail junction and the giant trees and a soft dripping sound somewhere beyond the trees” (“How” 210). The war’s spectral texture, then, extends well beyond its immediate experience and into the memories that persist after nearly two decades, even if “It’s hard to tell what happened next” in the retrospective reconstruction of the fatal event (210). Moving from the individual story to the larger collection in which it returns, we find that the ghost motif recurs at various points in Things as well: in the next chapter, “The Dentist,” when the narrator recalls Lemon wearing “a ghost mask” and roaming through a village one night (82); in the title story’s line, “They all carried ghosts” (9), though at this point readers do not recognize Lemon as among them; in the reassuring discovery in “Field Trip” that O’Brien’s then fictional return to Viet Nam and the site of a comrade’s death finds “No ghosts—just a flat, grassy field” (173); throughout the collection’s late entry, “The Ghost Soldiers,” where the narrator notes, “We called the enemy ghosts”; and in the closing memory of Linda, dead at nine but returned to O’Brien as a dreamed spirit. The Things They Carried is a haunted text. The memories of O’Brien’s childhood loss bleed back into the war, where “We kept the dead alive with stories” (Things 226). Indeed, this scene fades out with the reflection: “To listen to the story, especially as Rat Kiley told it, you’d never know that Curt Lemon was dead. He was still out there in the dark, naked and painted-up, trick-or-treating, sliding from hootch to hootch in that crazy white ghost mask. But he was dead” (227). The final sentence here did not appear in the Esquire version of the story (141), but its cold reality dissipates by the last paragraph in Things, when various ghosts return once more, O’Brien writing that he “can still see” Linda through a “spell of memory and

11 The Things version of this sentence reads, “It happened, to me, nearly twenty years ago...” (67; original emphasis).

12 Unless otherwise noted, all parenthetical references to O’Brien’s books are to their current reprints from Broadway or Mariner Books.

13 In the Esquire version of this story, the paragraph continues, “When a guy named Olson was killed, in February, everybody started saying, ‘The Holy Ghost took him’” and then describes the death of a soldier named Ron Ingo (95), but O’Brien cut both sentences for the book version.
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Figure One: “How to Tell a True War Story,” Esquire, October 1987.
imagination,” and he “can see Kiowa, too, and Ted Lavender and Curt Lemon” (232). Whether or not “How to Tell a True War Story” calls itself a “ghost story,” The Things They Carried certainly is one, and, in its mournful wish to recover lost comrades and childhood sweethearts, a love story as well.

For the Things “true war story” to have retained this reference to itself as also a ghost story, then, would have gathered these threads into a single metatextual reference. In addition, as a third term the ghost story would nudge the text’s closing dynamics away from a more straightforward dichotomy between having been either a “war” or “love” story, inserting loss and inescapable memory alongside the deep bonds of soldiers in combat. The Esquire version thus balances the presence of still living comrades-in-arms with the felt absence of those who have not survived. We might even understand the ghost story here as capturing significant events left out of the published text, given O’Brien’s penchant for fictionalizing his individual history in the war, what Steve Erickson thinks of as “the crucial scene … that doesn’t take place, the ghost scene that haunts corporeal ones” (16).

We might also see “True War Story” as another kind of ghost story by reading against the textual grain, turning from the tragic loss of American soldiers to the “haunting absence of the Vietnamese” in this and so many other narratives of the American war in Viet Nam (Nguyen, “Speak” 32). My own references to the war will take this form, rather than the still more common “Vietnam war,” which is a “misnomer,” Viet Thanh Nguyen writes, “because Viet Nam is a noun and not an adjective, a country and not a war” (“Speak” 33). There is no visible Vietnamese military presence in O’Brien’s story, except in the indirect effect of mines, sniper fire, and the mysterious sounds heard, or

14 A typescript version of this scene inserted the phrase “and a young man I killed,” a reference to the earlier story “The Man I Killed,” but was deleted before the first edition (HRC 15.9).
15 I am mindful as well of Scott Laderman and Edwin A. Martini’s observation that “names that rely on the unified subjects supposedly signified by ‘America’ and ‘Vietnam’ obscure not only the local but the international and transnational nature of this particular war that is crucial to understanding its history and legacies” (2). As Nguyen points out, “All wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory” (“Remembering” 132), so my references to the “American war in Viet Nam” are intended to redirect the usual designation of the conflict as expressing an American historical or moral crisis that happened to occur in Indochina. On this issue, see also Hixson 44. For an insightful and richly detailed history of the war “from the perspectives of the ‘other’ side,” see Lien-Hang T. Nguyen (312).
perhaps imagined, by the recon patrol, which is in keeping with O’Brien’s own experience of the war, in which his unit found “no strong enemy to fight” and “never faced any battalion” (Herzog, Writing 105). O’Brien recalls the months he spent marching through Quang Ngai Province as a rifleman and then a radio operator as soaked through with a “‘bogeyman’ feel” that “still haunts me”: “The ghosts are from what happened prior to my getting there in terms of the bombing of the place, the wreckage of this area, the dislocation of all the villagers” (105). As this kind of ghost story, counterfocalized in Gayatri Spivak’s terms away from Rat Kiley and the O’Brien figure operating as the narrative voice, the Esquire text would gesture toward the displaced presence of the villagers encountering Curt Lemon when he “goes out on ambush almost stark naked” (“How” 208). The revisions from magazine to book take a slight step in this direction, changing “goes out on ambush” to “hikes over to a ville and goes trick- or- treating” in the first edition (76), a line that has remained stable in the book’s printings since. This change incorporates a civilian life in the “ville” in contrast to the purely militarized space of the ambush. Neither text imagines its narrative from the villagers’ point of view, though, locating an indigenous voice not in the people but in the place itself, as in Rat Kiley’s tale of mountains “talking. … The whole country. Vietnam, the place talks” (“How” 212; original emphasis).16

While the soldiers assigned to the listening post have no choice but to listen to the “whole country,” none of the Americans in “War Story” hear any actual Vietnamese voices. This absence is in keeping with O’Brien’s sense that because he does not “know the life of the VC and the life of the Vietnamese” he should not “deign to speak for people who can speak very well for themselves” (Wharton 94). Elsewhere in Things O’Brien attributes a hypothetical narrative to a Vietnamese subject, as in “The Man I Killed,” but there the fact of death leaves O’Brien as the only possible narrator. Even without the direct presence of Vietnamese voices in “War Story,” though, we can still adapt Yen Lê

16 Beginning with the first addition of Things, Rat continues, “It talks. Understand? Nam—it truly talks” (82; original emphasis).
Esperitu’s questions to this text: “How do we write about absences? How do we compel others to look for the things that are seemingly not there? How do we imagine beyond the limits of what is already stated to be understandable? To engage in war and refugee studies then to is to look for the things that are seemingly not there, or barely there” (xx). Thus we might imagine the villagers who will discover the mutilated corpse of the “baby VC water buffalo” (“How” 213), or redirect the uncomprehending American audience at the story’s end toward the true war stories that have not been told here. This kind of reading practice would open O’Brien’s texts to different kinds of inquiries, and relocate them alongside not only other fictions by American veterans, but also in conversation with the many Vietnamese writers speaking for themselves, such as Bao Ninh, Duong Thu Huong, Le Ly Hayslip, or Nguyen Quang Thieu, a poet O’Brien read upon returning to Viet Nam in 1994, among many others. So to “become tellers of ghost stories—that is, to pay attention to what modern history has rendered ghostly, and to write into being the seething presence of the things that appear to be not there” (Esperitu xix), we might latch onto O’Brien’s Esquire story and its subsequent versions as a window into the dynamics of telling or not telling more than one kind of war story. The removal of the “ghost story” line from this story’s book versions might open as well into a corresponding narrative about O’Brien’s multiple audiences, across several different kinds of magazines and through his books, and the ways in which his war stories and the Vietnamese stories they hint at are told and retold—or not told—in a variety of bibliographic contexts.

From the perspective of contemporary editorial theory, my primary methodological orientation throughout this study, O’Brien’s text is not finally either a love story or also a ghost story, but both versions at once, its “truth” residing not in a choice between versions but in their mutual interaction.

17 Liparulo and Maus present examples of such dialogic readings, though both their essays take O’Brien’s texts as the starting points that frame the field of comparison.
Editorial theory and textual scholarship, the areas of the humanities once referred to as philology, offer the most comprehensive account of how drafts and manuscripts work their way through the social processes of editing and publication, and present thorough (and much-debated) theories of textuality in relation to its material histories. This disciplinary background posits the “book as an expressive term” (McKenzie 9) by considering a text’s linguistic and bibliographic codes, as Jerome J. McGann calls them in *The Textual Condition*, in conjunction with each other: thus we might ask exactly how reading “True War Story” in the pages of a 1987 *Esquire* differs from doing so in a Houghton Mifflin first edition of *Things* or in a current Mariner Books reprint (or in any of the various editions in between, or in those that will eventually succeed the current reprint), attending to what George Bornstein terms the “textual aura,” which “emerges” from a text’s “original sites of incarnation” (*Material* 7).

Editorial theory also enables careful consideration of versions, not simply as a record of textual change but as a classificatory category, describing the “conception or aim of the work at a point of utterance” (Shillingsburg, *Resisting* 69). Prior to interventions by McGann, D.F. McKenzie, and others, Anglo-American editorial theorists conceived of versions as either more or less expressive of what G. Thomas Tanselle outlines as “final authorial intentions,” with an implicitly teleological model of textual development. German editorial theory and French genetic criticism have, in their own ways, privileged the development of the text at the draft and manuscript stages, though contemporary Continental

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18 But for a call for returning to that earlier term, see McGann’s *New Republic*. From the French perspective of *critique génétique*, Daniel Ferrer distinguishes between philology as focused on textual repetition, in order to establish a text’s dissemination history, and genetic criticism as concentrated on textual invention (“Critique” 21). McGann distinguishes between a text’s verbal content (linguistic codes) and everything contributing to the physical appearance of and material production of the text as comprising its bibliographical code (*Condition* 13). It should be noted that Shillingsburg is employing the terms “work” and “utterance” in specific ways here. For most contemporary textual scholars, including Shillingsburg, “work” refers to an immaterial entity based on a collection of material documents, what Shillingsburg defines as “an ideal or mental construct (or constructs) separate from but represented by physical forms” (*Resisting* 67). The work *The Things They Carried*, then, inheres in several typescripts, books, and magazine stories, but as a work refers to all those documents collectively, even if it can be accessed by a particular document at a particular time. Shillingsburg adapts “utterance” from J.L. Austin’s speech-act theory, to designate material instantiations of versions as well as the contexts surrounding those productions (*Resisting* 88).
theorists have begun dissolving once rigid distinctions between pre- and post-publication states, shifting instead toward a more expansive sense of the text as in a potentially continuous phase of development. On both sides of the Atlantic, the field now tends to consider versions as (at least in principle) equally meaningful, no longer seeking a “correct” or “final” or otherwise stable edited text, but instead examining an array of choices made and not made by writers, editors, and other participants in the production process. Rather than looking for an “imagined fixity” (Bryant, Fluid 174) in O’Brien’s texts, I examine the interpretive implications of various versions, asking not which one is more or less aesthetically or ethically or historically satisfactory, but thinking pragmatically about what kinds of work each version carries out with its audience, and in what ways those versions interact to form a larger notion of the work.

Finally, contemporary editorial theory interrogates the relationship between a particular physical document and the larger and immaterial work it stands in for. As Peter Robinson explains, “One cannot know the work without the documents—equally, one cannot understand the documents without a comprehension of the work they instance” (123). This is an important point for my study of O’Brien’s works, texts, and documents, because the affordances generated by particular documents yield a series of interpretive consequences for the corresponding works: in order to follow the various material forms that the story “Speaking of Courage” has inhabited, for instance, it is necessary to relate those documentary objects to broader conceptions of “Speaking of Courage” as a text and then as a work, and to its place in the larger works Going After Cacciato, where it was once going to appear but eventually did not, and The Things They Carried, where it is importantly reframed by the ensuing “Notes” chapter.

As I will argue in more depth below, this way of approaching textual variability has important consequences for O’Brien’s model of fictional truth, in which, as he puts it in the Things chapter “Good Form,” “story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth” (171), a distinction between imaginative possibility and historical reality in which the former can more powerfully and even more accurately
convey the nature of war. Part of the problem, as O’Brien and many other war writers see it, is that knowing the “truth” of what happens in war can be all but impossible in the first place. “In war you lose your sense of the definite, hence your sense of truth itself, and therefore it’s safe to say that in a true war story nothing much is ever very true,” O’Brien writes in the Esquire version of “True War Story” (214). In Things, the end of that sentence reads, “nothing is ever absolutely true” (78). This change came in response to a note from O’Brien’s Houghton Mifflin editor, Camille Hykes, on an early book manuscript: “Wouldn’t it seem, given the mechanics of how the work operates as a whole—those fictions of self, perspective, that ghostly fog—that ‘truth,’ here, should be qualified as somewhat relative?” (HRC 15.7). When Hykes then queried O’Brien whether to delete the paragraph altogether or “qualify” its claims, he replied in a marginal note, “I’ll qualify it with ‘absolutely’” (HRC 15.7).

Lest this seem to be precisely the kind of revision I have earlier promised not to dwell on, I would suggest that the nuances of this distinction, between “nothing much” being “ever very true” versus “nothing” (at all) being “ever absolutely true,” speak to the broader ways in which notions of truth operate in O’Brien’s fictions. The first statement leaves itself some wiggle room, a small space alongside the “nothing much” in which certain truths might turn out to be at least somewhat “true,” whereas the second statement is more categorical in its deletion of “much,” even while more “qualified” in its hesitancy before the standard of an “absolute” truth. Indeed, O’Brien appears as a quasi-character in Things, bearing only limited commonalities with O’Brien the author, as the interplay between these versions of

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21 I would extrapolate O’Brien’s claim as: because most American readers are cut off from the historical reality of war, and because that reality is so foreign to their lived experiences, they will be unable to arrive at a deeper kind of knowledge simply through happening-truth, lacking the contextual background to understand such reports. (“There’s an old joke,” the Iraq veteran Phil Klay writes, “‘How many Vietnam vets does it take to screw in a lightbulb?’ ‘You wouldn’t know, you weren’t there’” [Redeployment 170]). This kind of civic disconnection from the military is of course far more pronounced with the current all-volunteer force than during the Viet Nam era. See Brenda Bailey, America’s Army: Making the All-Volunteer Force (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2009). From narrative description and close identification with fictional points of view, though, readers can bridge this experiential gap and gain a kind of knowledge that would be impossible otherwise, even if grounded in stories that are avowedly fictional.

22 This manuscript turned up in the Houghton Mifflin files in 1999, when they sent it to O’Brien via his agent at the time, Lynn Nesbit (HRC 15.7).
O’Brien renounces the presence of “absolute” truth in this text. In both cases, O’Brien is in the unusual position of offering expert testimony, based on his first-hand knowledge of war, in order to assert the inherent limits of the knowledge derived from that expertise. Whereas most writers in this position would use their experiential background to tell their readers what they know on the basis of that experience—what war is “really like”—O’Brien instead deploys his first-hand knowledge as evidence for what he cannot claim to be either “very” or “absolutely” true. In effect, both versions take what might ordinarily be an implicit proviso lying behind a war story—having taken for granted that it’s difficult to know what “really” happened, here is a story of what (seemed to have) happened—and thrust it forward as a defining principle of the genre, so that what true war stories are about for O’Brien is the impossibility of their own truth.²³

Embedded within the transition from “nothing much … ever very” to “nothing … ever absolutely” are two important contexts that will apply to many of my readings to come. First, we might see the initial disavowal of truth as more apt for its original bibliographic environment, in keeping with the perceived ephemerality of a monthly magazine in contrast to the presumed longevity of the book. Reading “True War Story” as an *Esquire* story, we might more readily expect this casual, even off-handed retreat from the implied declaration that “nothing at all is ever true.” Reading “True War Story” as a chapter in *Things*, in contrast, we might more easily accommodate its still “qualified” denial of “absolute” truth as part of the book’s more expansive and more enduring representations of truth and war. From an editorial perspective, again, the “truth” lies in the interaction of both versions. Nothing much is ever absolutely true of O’Brien’s texts, we might say, other than their variability: to think that

²³ As Catherine Z. Elgin points out of statements of testimony and their audiences, “The tacit assumptions that govern the exchange may be riddled with provisos, exceptions, mitigating factors, and other restrictions on the scope or strength of the claim. ... But it may be that a lot of quite strong qualifications go without saying” (302). In contrast to the notions of testimony and truth put forward by C.J.A. Coady, including testimony about ghosts, Elgin focuses on the inherent constraints of “what goes without saying” on an evaluation of testimony, expert or otherwise. See Coady, *Testimony* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).
one version of the Curt Lemon story is true without qualification would be as wrong as to believe that one version of “True War Story” or any of O’Brien’s texts exists as a singular, reliable entity.

These problems of truth, reference, verifiability, and variability circle back finally to O’Brien himself, as he appears in the pages of Things, especially, where the text asserts his presence as “nothing much” like the historical author and yet still as “absolutely true” precisely because of this departure from the “real” O’Brien. I return to this example in greater depth in the conclusion to Chapter 4, but point here to the statement in “Good Form” where O’Brien (or “O’Brien”) articulates the liminal, even ghostly, presence of his actual self within the text(s), in print and on the manuscript page:

It’s time to cut the coyness <be blunt>.

I’m forty-three years old, true, and I’m a writer now, and a long time ago I walked through Quang Ngai Province as a foot soldier.

Almost everything else in this book is invented.

I don’t have a daughter named Kathleen. I don’t have a daughter. I don’t have children. To my knowledge, at least, I never killed anyone.

Jimmy Cross never visited me at my home in Massachusetts, because of course Jimmy Cross does not exist in the world of objects, and never did. He’s purely invented, like Martha, and like Kiowa and Mitchell Sanders and all the others.

I never ran away to the Rainy River. I wanted to—badly—but I didn’t.

Norman Bowker never wrote me any letters. He did not commit suicide. The letters are made-up, and the suicide too, and Norman Bowker himself.

And finally it has to be said outright that the Tim who appears in this book, even at this instant, is not the Tim who sits here pecking away at a typewriter. The writer-Tim invents outlandish lies in the service of his stories, but the character-Tim swallows those lies and lives them and feels the truth below. *(Things 171; HRC 15.8)*
On the second Things manuscript, which a note from O’Brien describes as “incorporating all copyediting changes, author’s revisions, etc. from 1st copyedited m.s.” (HRC 16.1), and again on the author’s set of proofs for November 1989, he has crossed through “in this book” in the second paragraph (HRC 16.2, 16.5), so that it reads simply “Almost everything else is invented,” the version that has persisted across all published editions (so far). This deletion broadens the scope of invention to encompass not just the fictional parameters established in “this book,” spreading the text’s self-confessed fictionality into O’Brien’s works more broadly, and perhaps to the even wider stream of true war stories as a genre.

Glimmers of the Esquire line “nothing much is ever very true” shine through in the slim overlap between the writer Tim and the character Tim, as there is still a small degree of common “truth” in their shared ages, occupations, and military histories. Similarly, the Things denial of “absolute” truth sounds in the “lies” invented by O’Brien as author and swallowed by O’Brien as character, even as that fictional O’Brien still “feels the truth below”—the absence of a surface happening-truth giving way, in part through the erasure of its expectation, to a more fundamental story-truth that does not depend for its status on reference or verifiability. The published version of Things displaces this connection, both in the revision of the Esquire text and in its erasure of the longer passage that would have followed on this chapter’s initial declaration of its text’s fictionality. In that respect, the published text in relation to the deleted draft functions similarly to traumatic memories in relation to traumatic events, as such memories often “are not carbon copies of the original experience, but instead are reconstructed with currently active goals of the rememberer” (Klein 65). That is, the happening-truth of the traumatic event

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24 O’Brien made this point in an unpublished introduction for what the archive labels an “unknown edition”:

In my view, a work of fiction must have the immediate, participatory qualities of a dream. The fiction must feel real, because dreams are real. (It would be a lousy dream – a non-dream, in fact – if you were constantly to pause and think, ‘Hey, none if this is happening.’) ... By using my own name in this book, along with a few autobiographical details, I hoped to add one more device to the bag of dreaming aids. The idea was simply to encourage belief, to generate a sense of immediacy and urgency, to ease the reader into a new, invented reality (HRC 15.8).
is replaced by the story-truth produced by the (re)integration of traumatic memories into an ongoing sense of self and away from their insistent repetition as “the past that won’t be past” (Outka 78). As the psychologist Kitty Klein observes, “One of the marvelous features of narrative is that it can transform memories of unspeakably awful experiences into streamlined representations that lose their ability to derail cognition” (65). This process applies to O’Brien’s tendency to repeatedly fictionalize particular events from his experiences in Viet Nam, such as the death of his friend Chip Merricks, which lies behind the Curt Lemon episode in “True War Story” (Herzog, O’Brien 29-30). As Mark A. Herberle points out, in O’Brien’s work such incidents are “replaced and supplemented by a fiction ... that is more ‘true’ than what actually happened yet remains without closure” (Artist 195). But, as I will show throughout this book, not only does O’Brien rewrite such events by creating new fictional contexts through which to return to them, but he also rewrites them literally, returning to revise key textual moments rather than leave them finished. As O’Brien’s texts dwell in multiple versions, they evoke for the bibliographically attuned reader a material echo of the wartime and postwar traumas that resonate across O’Brien’s authorial career. This effect is what I will posit as traumatic textuality.

While O’Brien is hardly the only author to engage in extensive revision, his works’ refusal of stability stands out for the way this textual condition expresses the traumatic nature of the (true) war story. The relationship O’Brien evinces between the practice of (re)writing and the production of fictional truth stands apart even from other American writers whose careers have been shaped by the war. Robert Olen Butler, for instance, insists that successful revision is not a technical matter, but rather that, “Re-writing is re-dreaming. It is not a separate, conscious, analytical process. It is a return to the

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25 To cite only a few examples among other 20th-century American novelists: Louise Erdrich has famously rewritten Love Medicine, with three versions in print so far; Gore Vidal recalls asking Tennessee Williams why he was revising a story that had just been published, whereupon Williams “looked at me, vaguely, then said, ‘Well, obviously it’s not finished’” (xx); and Michael Cunningham reports, “It’s all I can do not to go from bookstore to bookstore with a pen, grabbing my books from the shelves, crossing out certain lines I’ve come to regret and inserting better ones. For many of us, there is not what you could call a ‘definitive text’” (10). O’Brien has effectively put Cunningham’s desire into practice, with his introduction of extensive post-publication variants into various editions of his books.
unconscious, which is where the deepest, truest part of the work was created in the first place” (Hecht 93). Here and in the lectures collected as From Where You Dream, Butler posits the “truth” of fiction as a matter of readerly feel, what he often calls the “thrum” versus the “twang” experienced by authors rereading their works in order to edit them, so that there is ultimately a single and particular “truth” for which the fiction aims, even if its terms of expression seem amorphous along the way. Despite these positions on the processes of composition and revision, Butler has engaged in arguably more radical post-publication revision than O’Brien, adding two stories to his collection A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain for a new edition published nine years after the first. These two “bonus tracks,” as Butler calls them (qtd. in Luscher 50), reconfigure the cumulative narrative, which has been set primarily among Vietnamese refugees in Louisiana and now relocates back to Viet Nam, closing the volume with the story of a U.S. soldier who has “just walked away” from the war (262) and now lives in a rural village with his Vietnamese family. This additional material complicates the closure originally established by the title story, which ends ”His kitchen was full of such smells that you knew you had to understand everything or you would be incomplete forever” (249), re-emphasizing this sense of incompleteness and returning it finally to an American perspective, as the book’s new last lines portray the GI’s memory of his “other life,” when he “knew that one day I would escape” (269).  

Karl Marlantes, a former Marine lieutenant who spent more than thirty years writing and revising his novel Matterhorn (2010), arrives at a similar conclusion from a different direction, describing his desire to present a false version of events when trying to write about a firefight between his unit and a group of North Vietnamese infantry: “I kept compulsively writing then these three NVA stood up in their hole. I was in a different frame of mind. I gunned them down. But this was a lie. I did no such thing. Yet through several drafts of the manuscript I kept writing this fictional ending of my story as if it were true” (What 99; original emphasis). As Marlantes explains, he and the rest of his unit were “killing NVA

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26 For a perceptive and more detailed reading of the revised collection, see Luscher.
without quarter wherever we could find them” (101) in response to the death of “Canada,” an especially respected and trusted Marine. In fact, he cannot recall the details of his own part in the battle, but finds the invention of these three particular North Vietnamese fighters to be ultimately emotionally healing: “I realize now that what I did was make up a story in order to get back into my feelings, feelings I’d suppressed and ignored all that long day, and many long days and years before and following” (102). For Marlantes, the relationship between story- and happening-truth is nearly the opposite as for O’Brien, for whom “trauma is constantly recirculated in different forms with different outcomes, without linear progression or closure” (Heberle, Artist 33). Marlantes uses what O’Brien would consider to be story-truth at the manuscript stage in order to arrive eventually at the ambiguous but still reliable happening-truth of the firefight’s published version in Matterhorn, where Mellas, the protagonist and authorial stand-in, is subsumed within the Marines’ group action: “The remaining NVA in nearby gun pits stood up, weaponless, eyes filled with terror, and raised their hands. They were cut down in seconds as every available weapon on the hill turned on them” (487). O’Brien typically veers away from historically verifiable accounts at any phase of the textual production process, instead remaining within the sphere of story-truth all along, in one version or another. In this respect, revision for O’Brien is not a matter of finding the way to an essential or stable “truth,” as for Butler or Marlantes or many other writers, but of following a range of alternate fictional paths in order to arrive at multiple and contingent truths.

Before turning in the remainder of this introduction to more detailed examinations of truth in fiction, wartime trauma, and the vicissitudes of narratives trying the impossible task of telling the truth about war, I delve a bit further into editorial theory as a framing context for this project, especially in terms of eventual scholarly editions of O’Brien’s works. Genetic editing, the method through which many Continental scholars, especially, have traced texts’ manuscript origins, will be impossible in

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O’Brien’s case; we will not be able to explore the “generative dimension” of the avant-texte (Hay, “Does” 74) back to its origins. Despite that disappointing absence, eventual scholarly editions of O’Brien’s works will still have a substantial production history to excavate, spanning pre-published versions, in typescripts, galleys, and page proofs; as well as multiple published versions, from magazines to first and numerous later editions. Readers encountering those editions will find the disorienting effects that Paul Eggert ascribes to the editorial presentation of textual change more generally: “We begin to sense, as we pore over the editor’s recording of the variants, that this work has had a life of its own, a process of coming into being, and then a further process of being socialized through taking public forms in print. Its text did not remain stable over time: which is the opposite of the expectation with which we have naively come to literary works—or at least to the books that embody them” (“Apparatus” 102). Because scholarly O’Brien editions, if ever produced, remain in the distant future, it is far too soon to speculate on whether they would take print or electronic form, the first question facing any contemporary editor. As Kenneth M. Price notes, though, “electronic editorial undertakings are only imperfectly described by any of the terms currently in use: edition, project, archive, thematic research collection” (435). And to these we could add Peter L. Shillingsburg’s notion of “knowledge sites,” online repositories for the wealth of information and material potentially available (Gutenberg 80-94). The terminological ambiguity that Price cites derives largely from the “capaciousness” of electronic projects (433), which can, at least potentially, present not just an editor’s particular representation of a particular edition resting on the mass of documents still housed in the archive, but rather, the entirety of those documents, along with a wide range of related materials. Whereas print editions, as Robinson notes, present an implicit argument about what a text should (and should not) consist of, a digital edition “can do something very different: it can allow the reader to see the text of the document construct itself, layer by layer, from blank page to fully written text” (109-10). In the case of O’Brien, that might mean, say, being able to peruse the thousands of pages of documents related to
In the Lake of the Woods, contained in thirty-two folders at the Ransom Center: a typescript, page proofs with O’Brien’s corrections, setting copy, notes, correspondence, and more. But an electronic edition would hardly have to stop there, potentially encompassing as well the magazine stories as which three chapters first appeared, in the Atlantic Monthly and Esquire; the Showtime film based on the novel (electronic editions lack the constraints of print when it comes to audiovisual materials, though they still require permissions fees); O’Brien’s related writings, such as “The Vietnam in Me” or his lecture on My Lai; relevant comments from O’Brien’s many interviews; not to mention the masses of historical and critical material related to the massacre and to the novel. As Price observes, “The possibility of including so much and so many kinds of material makes the question of where and what is the text for an electronic edition every bit as vexed (if not more so) than it has been for print scholarship” (436).

A printed scholarly edition of Lake (or any of O’Brien’s works) would have its virtues and limitations as well, not least among them a greater manageability of scale, albeit with a corresponding drop-off in scope. Restricted to a print format, a scholarly edition of Lake would still respond to the materials outlined above, both in the establishment of its text(s) and as background for its annotations. Readers would lose access to digital reproductions of thousands of documents, as could be available (if affordable) in an electronic format, and so would instead encounter these second-hand, through references and discussions in the editorial apparatus. One of the trickier questions for such an edition would be how to handle the three magazine stories related to the novel: “Loon Point,” “The People We Marry” (the novel’s original title [Kaplan, Understanding 218n1]), and “How Unhappy They Were.” Including the texts of these stories in an appendix or elsewhere would allow for straightforward enough comparisons of their linguistic contents, but would deny readers a more fully developed historical sense of what it would have meant to have read these chapters in their original periodical contexts, in relation

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28 Digital editions of O’Brien’s works would be especially useful in demonstrating the material interactions between O’Brien and his editors on the pages of galleys and proofs, in ways that would transfer conceptions of the literary archive away from their tendency “to enshrine the single hand of the author” (Chartier and Stallybrass 139).
to the other articles, stories, and advertisements surrounding them (for a fuller discussion of this
problem, see Chapter 7). Ironically, as Price points out, this can be an issue even in the electronic realm
(436), but it is perhaps more difficult to resolve in a print format. Even a separate volume focusing solely
on O’Brien’s periodical publications, while a worthwhile enterprise on its own terms, could never reprint
the entire scope of relevant magazine issues (and even then would still lack the full bibliographic context
imagined by the complete run of each periodical in the months or years surrounding O’Brien’s particular
contributions, not to mention copies of competing or complementary magazines from similar genres). 29
Conceptually, either kind of edition would have to wrestle with a final question, namely its orientation
toward the text or the document as the governing editorial entity. By “document” here I refer to the
material form of some particular text, such as a page from a typescript, and by “text” I mean a larger
sense of that document, such as the typescript in its entirety. (Both terms are then comprised by the
immaterial notion of the “work,” so that Going After Cacciato, say, would exist as a work in multiple
texts emerging from a much larger number of documents.) As is to be expected, there is some division
on this issue among those practicing and theorizing print and digital editions. Hans Walter Gabler, for
instance, perhaps still best-known to the broader scholarly community for his innovative synoptic
edition of Ulysses, has lately gravitated toward the document as the provenance of the electronic
edition, preferring to present the “ineluctably material support for texts” (“Beyond” 16) rather than
“texts” themselves—that is, using the electronic edition as a space from which to present all the
documents relevant to a text rather than seeking to coalesce them into the narrower frame of the text.
Robinson evinces the opposite approach, insisting on the text as the “the site of meaning which links the
document and the work,” as he finds that the document itself “without the text of the work we
construct from it is mute, simply marks on a surface” (120). In imagining—but at this point nothing

29 This is a 20th-century version of the historical problem Shillingsburg outlines for the Victorian publishing context
in Gutenberg, Ch. 5. For a defense of print editions, see West’s Introduction.
more—an eventual scholarly O’Brien edition, I find myself closer to Robinson’s side of the question than Gabler’s, the persuasiveness of each individual argument (which are far more nuanced and complex than I can represent them here) notwithstanding. Especially for works which have not been edited at all in the scholarly sense, I would argue, a textual orientation is both more necessary and more effective than a documentary stance, in order to complete the preliminary step of presenting properly edited works before readers in the first place. Once that admittedly ambitious task has been finished, or at least begun, a pivot toward a documentary approach might helpfully balance the scales toward a more fully historicized exploration of the many documents operating behind the surface of the editorial texts, but this remains for now an entirely hypothetical issue.  

In relation to earlier monographs on O’Brien—Steven Kaplan’s Understanding Tim O’Brien (1995), Herzog’s Tim O’Brien (1997), Heberle’s A Trauma Artist (2001), and Stefania Ciocia’s Vietnam and Beyond (2012)—my starting point is the archival record in the Ransom Center and dispersed across O’Brien’s published stories, essays, and books, rather than a particular theoretical, biographical, or critical lens. The topics I pursue in the following chapters are thus grounded in the available material evidence, focusing on what I see as the most urgent interpretive questions arising from those documents, taking my readings through intersections of textual scholarship, book history, periodical studies, Viet Nam and trauma studies, narratology, and the philosophy of fiction. I do not touch on some issues often of moment in O’Brien scholarship, such as representations of masculinity, the relationship between postmodernism and the American war in Viet Nam, or the sequential development of O’Brien’s career with equal attention to all his major works. While my study proceeds chronologically, from If I Die in a Combat Zone to July, July, I frequently refer to multiple works at once, especially as their production histories overlap or intersect.

30 For further discussion of these theoretical and practical editorial issues, see the cluster of essays organized by Barbara Bordalejo in Ecdotica 10 (2013), and the special issue of Literature Compass on “Scholarly Editing in the Twenty-First Century,” 7 (2010).
A final point of methodological clarification: while textual scholarship frequently pursues authorial actions and intentions in relation to a text’s specific, material changes and developments, it does so with an appreciation for the social networks within which authors operate. McGann has emphasized this historical materialism to a greater extent than some other editorial theorists, privileging a work’s published forms as most expressive of the social circumstances of their production, despite or even because of the complementary or competing impulses of editors, publishers, or other agents influencing an author.31 In contrast, such theorists as Bryant, Sally Bushell, Paul Eggert, and Shillingsburg tend to acknowledge the primacy of (most) authors in the process of textual production. In either case, the most pressing issue for readers is how different versions of texts work in different ways interpretively. In the chapters that follow, I am most concerned to read texts and versions, though I often attend along the way to local and sometimes global textual decisions O’Brien has made, either on his own or in concert with editors. I return to a range of concepts and methods in editorial theory and textual scholarship as the need arises in the chapters that follow, but turn now to truth, trauma, and narrative—the building blocks of the true war story. As O’Brien’s work demonstrates throughout his career, issues of fictional truth resonate in particular ways for war stories, but also open into more general considerations of art’s role in public culture. Textual scholarship at its core, as McGann writes, seeks “to preserve, to monitor, to investigate, and to augment our cultural life and inheritance” (Republic 4). In order to carry forward the lessons of O’Brien’s metafictional inquiries into the political, social, and cultural values of “truth,” then, we will need to use the materials available at the Ransom Center and elsewhere to understand how his texts came into being, and in what forms they will remain available for future generations of readers.

31 As West notes, “Publishers have intentions in literary work just as authors do” (20).