War Trauma, Recovery Narration, and the Need for Resistance: The Case of D. F. Brown's Vietnam War Poetry

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Biography

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Abstract

As yet another generation of traumatized U.S. soldiers return home, this study of Viet-Nam Veteran D. F. Brown's poetry provides a timely look at the intersection of language, trauma, and warfare. While the relentless call to war either quiets combat survivors' testimonies or molds them into the material of heroic lore, Brown's fractured and tortured poetry, however, provides an alternative expression of warfare. His lines deliver not only the immediate impact of war's violence, they also capture the lingering, disruptive effects of a soldier's post-traumatic identity. After publishing in the mid-1980's to limited critical attention, Brown's under-appreciated poetry resurfaces now as a valuable voice of resistance. His verse not only debunks the myths that inform popular discussions of war, it also forces a long-overdue reevaluation of how our culture at large and psychologists in particular listen to the accounts of traumatized combatants.

With a framework adapted from James Dawes' *The Language of War* (2002), this paper illustrates Brown's verse's implicit critique of the "emancipatory" value of language, where the expansion of discourse assumedly reduces violence. Questioning this commonly held view of narrative psychotherapists and cultural critics, Brown instead exposes language's "disciplinary" functions, where discourse itself serves as a form of potential violence and control in the process of telling one's trauma. Refusing to capitulate to the sense-making tropes of recovery or the warrior-as-hero ethos, Brown's verse demonstrates the value of non-narrative and non-normative expressions of war's violence. Representing the torments of post-traumatic identity, his verse resists the discursive restructuring of the painful memories cultivated in combat. The poetry's resultant stark reflections on language, psychology, and warfare demand our urgent attention else we proudly and unthinkingly expose the next generation of soldiers to the trauma of battle.

Résumé
Au moment où une nouvelle génération de soldats américains rentre au pays après avoir subis des traumas, cet article sur la poésie de D. F. Brown, ancien combattant du Viet-Nam, présente opportunément une perspective à l'intersection des thématiques du langage, du trauma, et des combats. Alors que la commémoration constante de la guerre tend soit à tempérer les témoignages des survivants, soit au contraire à les enfermer dans l'illusion de l'héroïsme, la poésie torturée de Brown est d'une tout autre expression. Par sa poésie il nous fait part non seulement du choc frontal de la violence de la guerre, mais il nous fait appréhender également la mise en place des perturbations post-traumatiques récurrentes qu'elle provoque sur la personnalité des soldats. Après sa publication au milieu des années 1980 qui est pratiquement passée inaperçue, l'œuvre poétique méconnue de Brown refait maintenant surface et est désormais reconnue comme une expression de résistance. Sa poésie non seulement dénonce les mythes qui sont au cœur des propos les plus communs sur la guerre, mais aussi force, d'une manière bien tardive, à reconsidérer la manière dont notre culture au sens large, et les psychologues en particulier, prête l'oreille aux récits des combattants ayant subis des traumas.

S'appuyant sur le cadre conceptuel de l'ouvrage de James Dawes, *The Language of War*, le présent article veut montrer que la poésie de Brown critique implicitement la valeur « émancipatrice » du langage selon laquelle la violence serait reduite par l'abondance de l'épanchement verbal. A rebours de cette opinion souvent formulée par les psychothérapeutes et les critiques, Brown voit dans le langage une fonction « disciplinaire » où le discours est potentiellement porteur d'une violence empêchant l'expression du trauma de l'individu. Par son refus d'entrer dans la figuration de ce qui fait sens, ou de la figure du guerrier-héros, la poésie de Brown nous montre la valeur de l'absence narrative et de l'absence de norme pour l'expression de la violence de la guerre. Traduisant les tourments de l'individu ayant subi les traumas, sa poésie résiste à la restructuration verbale des souvenirs douloureux des combats. L'écho de cette poésie sur le langage, la psychologie et les conditions du combat exige de notre part une attention immédiate, pour que nous n'exposions pas d'une manière irréfléchie et fanfaronne une nouvelle génération aux traumas des combats.

Keywords
D.F. Brown, War Poetry, Vietnam War, Viet Nam, PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), trauma, *The Language of War* (2002), Veterans, Psychotherapy, PCP (Personal Construct Psychotherapy), Manifest Destiny, Heroism, Propaganda, Public Discourse.

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Narrative "adaptation" as termed by current psychoanalysts, is heralded in the field of war-trauma psychology. It is, for many therapists, a trusted practice of cathartic

verbal reconstruction of the original violence. In theory, through the assumedly benign medium of language survivors learn to "normalize" the radical effects and memories of their trauma. Judith Herman, in her seminal work *Trauma and Recovery*, defines the therapist's role in this process of eliciting a survivor's narrative. She writes:

> Throughout the exploration of the trauma story, the therapist is called upon to provide a context that is at once cognitive, emotional, and moral. The therapist *normalizes* the patient's responses, *facilitates naming and the use of language*, and shares the emotional burden of the trauma. She also contributes to *constructing a new interpretation* of the traumatic experience that affirms the dignity and value of the survivor. (178-9, my italics)

As a sort of narrative editor, the therapist's aim is to bring the survivor's liminal experiences back into the malleable realm of "normal" linguistic expression. Narrative, ripe with codes and controlling conventions, facilitates the therapist's guidance in how to interpret, rename, and re-contextualize the survivor's trauma. This practice, however, requires the assumption that language is an apparatus that can (with some obvious coercion) adequately contain, restructure, and thus essentially tame the psychological effects of traumatic violence.

Constructing a narrative, from the psychologist's view, alleviates the survivor from the fluid, incomprehensible nature of memories as they occur in Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) patients. This trust in narrative, however, fails to recognize the limits, distortions, and levels of power inherent in relying on language as a tool for psychic recovery. Therapists desire to stabilize a victim's trauma in an array of narrative meaning, space, and time; but, that matrix is a relatively fluid social construction. Rigid narrative codes can, therefore, permeate the exchange between therapist and patient. In the celebration of language's supposed ability to counter violence an important counter claim is forgotten, if not silenced. Language is pervasive; and, via narrative, it serves as a powerful ideological apparatus. Using the poetry of D.F. Brown, this paper will argue that while language can have the effect of normalizing a survivor's trauma, language can also normalize the cultural roots of violence that caused the initial violence.

In his book *The Language of War*, James Dawes identifies two theories of language and narrative as they relate to war, providing a division central to this paper's purpose. The first Dawes calls the "emancipatory model," where force and discourse are understood as being "mutually exclusive" if not diametrically opposed. While this model, as Dawes suggests, is most commonly embraced by political theorists; it also informs the work of many narrative psychotherapists who, in the tradition of Freudian talk therapy, trust communication as a means of healing and as a vehicle for meaning-making. The second Dawes calls the "disciplinary model," which sees force and discourse as being "mutually constitutive" (1-23). Here, as commonly argued by literary critics, language is understood as a coercive medium and a vehicle of power via interpellating (Althusser), controlling, and even speaking its subjects, vice its subjects speaking it. This theoretical perspective challenges

language's sense-making ability because of the slippery relationship between linguistic signifiers and what they inevitably fail to statically signify.

More important is the inherent power that language has over any speaker's identity and assumptions. As Judith Butler writes in *Excitable Speech*:

> There is no purifying language of its traumatic residue [... for] to be named by another is traumatic: it is an act which precedes my will, an act that brings me into a linguistic world in which I might then begin to exercise agency at all. A founding subordination, and yet the scene of agency, is repeated in the ongoing interpellation of social life. (38)

From this "disciplinary" perspective, traumatized survivors or witnesses to violence can never communicate the radical or "abnormal" nature of trauma to others without employing the sanctioned words, tropes, and conventions of their culture's powerful status quo discourse.

For trauma survivors, as Holocaust psychologist Henry Krystal remarks, "words [can] convey messages neither intended nor recognized [...] They become a vehicle through which the struggle continues" (214). For Krystal, as in Brown's poetry, the telling of trauma must not be a means of normalization; it is precisely the opposite: a struggle to keep the reality of trauma from being reduced to a conventional or de-politicized discourse. Literary critic Kali Tal seconds this notion in *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma*.

> Bearing witness is an aggressive act. It is born out of a refusal to bow to outside pressure to revise or to repress experience, a decision to embrace conflict rather than conformity, to endure a lifetime of anger and pain rather than to submit to the seductive pull of revision and repression. (7)

With these claims in mind, I introduce the work of U.S.-Viet Nam veteran D. F. Brown whose poetry embraces this paradoxical intersection of language and trauma, recovery and resistance. In doing so, it provides a meaningful, mediating alternative -- the appropriateness of poetry to convey trauma. Brown's verse is a model of traumatized writing where narrative does not have to normalize; instead, his lines act as a valuable site of resistance and offers a critique of commonly accepted narrative expectations that cloak the values that sustain warfare and violence. Thus his voice, indirectly at least, challenges current practices in trauma therapy.

Pretending and the Loss of the First Person Narrative

In his poem "First Person-1981," Brown communicates the lasting effects of combat trauma. Both a commentary on and a linguistic model of war trauma's impact on survivors, the poem represents the narrator's struggle to regain personal agency in a life subject to what is often diagnosed as PTSD. The poem's lines are as fractured and incomplete as the identity of many soldiers who participate in violent combat. The following is the poem, in its entirety:

> there are days I have to pretend

I am someone else to get out of bed
make all the necessary noises
remember how it ended, how the end
is still caught in so many

I get through these days
The lowest part of the jungle
a pale green gnarl
roots and vines
searching for sunlight
through
this tangle
(*Unaccustomed Mercy* [*UM*], 43 in Ehrhart)

Because trauma shatters what psychologist Jeffery Kauffman calls one's "assumptive world," it erodes the very foundations of a survivor's or witness's self-identity. "The basic dimensions of the assumptive world," writes Kauffman, "are meaning, self-worth and benevolence" (207). Exposed to the existential challenges of trauma, these assumptions are often proven, to survivors at least, to be hollow self-and-socially-constructed notions.

When one's assumptions of sensible order and safety are betrayed by a violent counter-reality, all that is relied upon for a stabilized sense of self disintegrates. As Kauffman suggests, "*traumatization is an exposure of the self in which the self fragments, loses its protective illusions and values, and hides in unnamable shame*" (206, his emphasis). It is not surprising, then, that the speaker in Brown's "First Person-1981" must "pretend" to be someone else and "make all the necessary noises" as expected of an actor creating a character on stage. With the voice of a radicalized, traumatized soldier, Brown's poetry speaks of the search "through / this tangle" of personal wreckage for a so-called "stable" sense of self, even in order to perform acts as banal as rising from bed each morning.

A clinical specialist for the U.S. Army from 1968-77, Brown served as a combat medic during the American War in Viet Nam where he was immersed in the gruesome reality of modern warfare. The bulk of his poetry reflects the difficulties of reconciling radical experiences of combat with once accepted notions of normal civilian life. For example, in his poem "Coming Home," Brown suggests how trauma emphasizes life's transitoriness long after the initial event has passed. In its last stanza, the poem's voice abruptly shifts from the first person to a disassociated third person identity for the returning soldier:

I marched out vagrant
A culprit at home nowhere
Or everywhere
Dancing stealth
Into living rooms

Someone has stacked his books
Records, souvenirs, pretending

> This will always be light
> And zoned residential
> (*Carrying the Darkness* [*CTD*], 47)

Here, the soldier confronts preserved relics that define who he is expected to return to being; yet, to fulfill his previously "light," civilian identity would require "pretending" that he retained his "residential" values in the face of combat. Like many accounts of soldiers who have enacted or witnessed extreme violence, Brown's poetry suggests how trauma annuls one's sense of belonging and trivializes the community the soldier fought to supposedly defend.

Jonathan Shay, a psychologist devoted to the treatment of Viet Nam veterans like Brown, discusses this effect of warfare on a soldier's worldview and how foreign it is to the non-traumatized person:

> Danger of death and mutilation is the pervading medium of combat. It is a viscous liquid in which everything looks strangely refracted and moves about in odd ways, a powerful corrosive that breaks down many fixed contours of perception and utterly dissolves others. Without an accurate conception of that danger we cannot comprehend war. (10)

It is this unique comprehension, or at least the suitable communication of combat-trauma's sour insights, that Brown, as a political poet, aims to express through his writing. Brown's body of powerfully and pointedly disjointed poems extends our knowledge of warfare beyond our popular associations of physical courage and heroism to show the severe psychic damage caused in soldiers who fight. Simultaneously his poetry exposes the culpability of the culture that asks, or rather, encourages them to do so, to then welcome their heroes home with an intolerance for their psychological conditions.

Trauma, in war and in other forms, is always politically tied to the dominant discourses of any culture. Preventing or at least reducing the systemic causes of trauma requires challenging the dominant epistemologies and ontologies of a given culture. Brown's poetry enacts this challenge as it resists typical narrative construction. While trauma produces severe individual existential crises for its survivors, it also raises questions about the ultimate responsibility for their victimization and can expose the lethal indifference to violence and injustice that characterizes many of our social and political institutions.

As literary critic Lorrie Smith remarks, "Vietnam veteran poets [like Brown] call attention to how insistently our perceptions of war are determined by cultural codes, literary conventions, and received language" (65). As a trauma survivor, Brown's own loss of trust in first person narration prompts his poetry to resist these linguistic codes and conventions and to raise questions regarding language's larger role in perpetuating our culture's violence. Contrasted with current assumptions in trauma theory, poetry like Brown's provides a unique vantage point that exposes the limits and even the systemic dangers of narrative therapy's request of survivors to re-create their experiences. That is what Brown's above poems refer to as acts of "pretending" that, in essence, reduce the reality of violence's consequences.

Inspired by Brown's poetry as a constant touchstone, I will first explore the tenets of current narrative therapy in order to then complicate and critique some of the political implications of psychology's narrative practices. I submit that, with Brown's work as a guide, expressions of trauma can and must be allowed to resist the narrative discourse prized by psychotherapists. To remain true to both the nature of trauma and to the political urgency of preventing further acceleration of violence in our own culture and abroad, we must learn to listen to alternative voices like Brown's.

Traumatic Memories and the Loss of Narrative Conventions

Compounding the struggle to adapt to a post-traumatic perception, the PTSD soldier also loses the assumption that his or her past is fixed within well-defined, deliberately recallable memories. The usual matrix of time and space that locates "normal" memories is liquefied by trauma. As psychologist Sandra Bloom discusses, people who experience terrifying violence are often "noted to have a wide range of memory problems with vivid intrusive memories of a past event often alternating with partial or total amnesia of the traumatic events" (28). Bloom describes "normal" memories of two kinds: either "implicit [and] procedural" (in that they are conditioned, sensorimotor habits and skills) or "declarative [and] explicit" (in that they are contained by the narrative constructs of language) (26). Traumatic memories of war, rape, assault, or other violences, however, are neither predictable in when or why they reoccur, nor are they readily contained in or controlled by the mechanisms of language. Traumatic memories therefore, are thought of by psychotherapists as being "abnormal," hence prompting them to employ techniques of disciplinary coercion to "normalize" a survivor's recollection of the traumatic event.

However, like Brown's "First Person-1981" suggests, to "remember how it [the traumatic event] ended" is not easily done. Because there exists no true closure or catharsis for traumatic suffering, "the end" or stasis of trauma is essentially unachievable. One's usual navigation through space, time, and language is rendered inadequate when dealing with the effects of traumatic experiences. Instead, as the poem offers, traumatized individuals must learn to cope with "how the end / is still caught in so many" (*UM*, 43). Note here how Brown, by deliberately omitting an object for this line, implies the innumerable associative, cognitive and non-cognitive, "so many" ways that traumatic memories unexpectedly and repeatedly reenter the lives of survivors. Hence, from the setting of his safe bed in the first stanza, we unexpectedly revisit with the narrator "The lowest part of the jungle," the same Viet Nam setting, perhaps, of his initial trauma.

As another of his poems entitled "When I am 19 I was a Medic" indicates, Brown often deliberately disrupts expected verb tenses and time sequences as a way of demonstrating how trauma is simultaneously part of a survivor's past, present, and future. Just as self-identity, morality, safety, and language are all fractured by acts of traumatic violence, Brown's poetic voice, line structure, and syntax are also as splintered as the traumatic experiences he reflects upon, remembers, or simply cannot forget. As Shay reflects upon his clinical work with PTSD diagnosed veterans, "Severely traumatized individuals lose authority over memory [...]. With this loss of a meaningful personal narrative that links past, present, and future comes a shrinkage of volition" (172, 176). Because the trauma survivor has no sense of control over his or her own life story or narrative, the traumatic memory dominates the individual

through flashbacks and nightmares; thus, many victims rely, either involuntarily or by choice, on the unhealthy denial and suppression of their initial trauma. Those that do address their trauma must do so with a constant, almost claustrophobic, sense of resistance. They must resist the urge to give in, to suppress the reality of the event, to erase the suffering, to create answers to unanswerable questions of why. Most challengingly, they must resist the attractive, yet false reintegration into the assumptive world of orderly, moral progress that they now know to be problematic and false.

As Brown's "First Person-1981" concludes (lines 6-12), "I get through these days / the lowest part of the jungle / a pale green gnarl / roots and vines / searching for sunlight / through / this tangle" (*UM* 43). By admitting, "I get through these days," the poem primarily comments on survival, not of the initial traumatic event, but in one's "gnarled" life after it. Brown, like all traumatized individuals, must learn to live in a "jungle"-like "tangle" of problematic memory, broken linguistic meanings, and the loss of basic assumptions. The "jungle" is the battlefield of the fight for one's regained volition and agency. As the poem suggests, even in 1981, ten years after his leaving combat, Brown is still "searching for sunlight:" a sense of clarity and control over his post-traumatic reality.

Unlike psychotherapeutic practices, however, Brown's poetry is a version of traumatic telling that attempts not to *restructure*, but rather to *represent* the phenomenology and psychology of the post-traumatic reality he deals with, and that we, as those who are normalized by socio-cultural power, must strive to learn from. His open form-free verse deliberately lacks consistent structure and, therefore, remains outside our cultural expectations for so-called "normal" ideological, narrative closure -- reminding us that with trauma, as with reality in general, there are no true closures, no final sense-making tropes.

As he remarks in an interview with Lorrie Smith, Brown deliberately employs these nonlinear poetic techniques because they "open the war to another reading [...] The absence of narrative drive in the poems requires another sort of investment from my reader." He continues, "The understanding syntax provides retards the understanding I desire [...] Combat is something else, and to fit it to grammar is to deform it and offer it up as possibility to understand" (Smith 59). Brown is suggesting that to write about trauma and warfare in any conventional form essentially propagates a lie: it suggests that the limitless dangers of warfare can be given the manageable limits of words, that the senseless effects of trauma can be made sense of and, therefore, logically and linguistically controlled, justified, or at worst, even excused. Literary critic Don Ringnalda adds, "Brown uses his poetry to confront a culture obsessed with understanding, with demystification, with answers, with packaging. In response to this dangerous obsession, Brown denies the reader conventional syntax and linear development" (168). As one Viet Nam veteran poet states:

> Vietnam War poetry speaks for itself, often in brutal, explicit language. After all, to those of us who served in Vietnam, the war is the most explicit experience we have ever seen, and not to use the language of the war would be to lie about it--and, to be dishonest, even for the sake of art, is the one thing an American Vietnam War veteran is never going to

> be able to do. He feels that he has been deceived enough, and he refuses to inflict another lie on others. (Ehrhart, *UM*, viii)

In this regard, by refusing the deceit implicit in normalizing trauma via sense-making narratives, Brown's poetry brings many of the assumptions driving contemporary narrative therapy into question.

Normalization and Narrative Therapy

Given the debilitating effects of trauma and PTSD on veterans like Brown, and on other survivors of violence, how do psychotherapists attempt to help these victims? In trauma theory, narrative (re)construction is heralded as the preeminent process for enabling survivors to resume normalized lives. Respected theorist/clinicians, including Robert Neimeyer, Judith Herman, Edward Rynearson, Mardi Horowitz, Cathy Caruth, Sandra Bloom, and Jonathan Shay (to name only a few), all proclaim the benefits of having survivors communicate their trauma as a form of sense-making, reordering meditation upon one's life before, during, and after the disruptive experience. The general tenet behind the narrative "retelling" (Rynearson) or "adaptation" (Neimeyer, Horowitz) of trauma (as opposed to the impossible goal of cure) is that (re)creating a personal account for the event restores a survivor's feeling of authorship and agency over his or her life. Since trauma constitutes a radical disruption in the progression of one's anticipated life story (as defined by dominant cultural expectations), the goal of "personal construct psychology (PCP)," as Neimeyer calls it, is to facilitate the "re-emploting," or narrative control of the effects of trauma (Neimeyer, et al., 32). Horowitz explains the process as the "activation" of a patient's "self-schema." He discusses the tendency of PTSD patients, "To bolster a sense of identity during stress, [by] turn[ing] for reflectance of self to others. Attachment and boding impulses are heightened" (10-11). In this light, the therapist capitalizes on the trust of a vulnerable patient, using Horowitz's terms, to activate a schema (or narrative form) that the psychologist determines will best help define the patient's most effective post-traumatic identity. The narrative form or schema emphasized, therefore, represents an inescapable act of power of the clinician over the patient. The therapist, whether aware or not, becomes the gatekeeper of whatever version of reality is deemed healthiest for the survivor.

Many therapists also extend the use of narration even beyond the intimate relationship they develop with the survivor's to emphasis what Shay calls the "communalization" (194) of trauma, or what Bloom calls the creation of "sanctuary" in "social connectedness" (47). Since trauma often disassociates victims from their once-trusted communities, narrative can serve as a vehicle for sharing their plight with representatives of those lost communities, or with a new community, in order to receive the needed empathy and compassionate support that survivors deserve. As Kali Tal observes, most literature of trauma is the product of three factors: "the experience of trauma, the urge to bear witness, and a need for community" ("Speaking," 217-8). Thus, be it reading from one's journal to an intimate therapy group, or publishing a personal memoir, writing is prized by most psychotherapists as a method of telling trauma, and leading to a state of communal recognition. Therapists emphasize that healing is necessarily a social function and only truly occurs when the traumatic event is granted significance and credence by a larger

group. For Viet Nam veteran writers this often meant "carrying the darkness" of their liminal stories back home to a culture of normalcy where they could finally testify to the horrible truth of warfare.

Audience, then, is obviously a necessary component in the narrative process; however, how does a survivor adequately describe trauma to a non-traumatized listener/reader? Trauma, after all, is an experience ultimately beyond expression. As trauma theorist and literary critic Tal asserts, trauma writing "demonstrates the unbridgeable gap between writer and reader and thus defines itself by the impossibility of its task: the communication of the traumatic experience" ("Speaking," 218). But, since this communicative process must occur for a survivor's health, we owe it to them to ponder the following questions: who exerts more influence over this narrative equation - the already liminal and traumatized survivor, the "normalizing" therapist, or the dominant language, tropes, and narrative conventions of the status quo culture/audience surrounding them both? Whose discourse retains the power over how trauma narratives are told and culturally codified? The answer, of course, should be the survivor; but, how often is it? These questions, I submit, are implicit in Brown's poetry and lead us to an important critique of PCP's generally positive regard for narrative therapy.

Brown writes, "– we live / with the killing, fight / every war we were / raised to fight / [...] / we rummaged our hearts / forget words" ("Eating the Forest," *CTD* 54). There is a significant hazard, one too often ignored in trauma theory, in trying to represent in words the un-representableness of combat trauma. As Brown suggests, in the face of killing words are often forgotten and unusable by soldiers. To replace the sense of betrayal, distrust, meaninglessness, darkness, and loss in the heart of the trauma survivor with words not fully his own is problematic. As Cathy Caruth argues, there are always potential risks in using narrative to care for trauma:

> The transformation of the trauma into a narrative memory that allows the story to be verbalized and communicated, to be integrated into one's own, and others', knowledge of the past, may lose both the precision and the force that characterizes traumatic recall [...] The capacity to remember is also the capacity to elide or distort. (153-154)

To normalize and make sense of trauma's senselessness, and to enact recovery through "communalization," the survivor's narrative must employ the symbology and words of their surrounding normal culture. Alternative expression is minimized.

The only language often available (or perhaps offered by some narrative therapists) to the survivor is bound to the very ideology of the culpable, dominant culture that enabled the trauma to occur. Storytelling conventions, where the good protagonist overthrows an axis of evil antagonists, where peaceful resolution ultimately follows an uncertain violent climax, and where sacrifices are always worthy actions, provide the capital needed to produce wars. The traumatized narrator, unaware of being re-emploted into dominate discourse, is seductively lured back to using the powerful narrative assumptions already renounced by trauma as being fictive illusions. Thus, the cycle of violence continues behind a veil of restored personal authorship and the realities of war, trauma, and violence - as only survivors

know them - are repeatedly sanitized in the name of psychological recovery and normalcy. This is the process Tal calls the "mythologization" of trauma; it works by:

> reducing a traumatic event to a set of standardized narratives (twice- and thrice-told tales that come to represent "the story" of the trauma) turning it from a frightening and uncontrollable event into a contained and predictable narrative. (*Worlds*, 6)

Resisting Myths of Self-Telling

That normative narration can somehow liberate one from suffering and adequately portray trauma to the community at large is an assumption that Brown takes to task. In his anthem poem, the fractured and impressionistic "Returning Fire," Brown begins by questioning the very notion of being able to adequately recall and tell trauma (lines 1-3):

> what we think
> we remember
> empty

and, he continues:

> it happens
> like no one can plan
> maybe
> only chance to know bravery
> you think so
> they drown in it
> you can't tell
> people from weeds
> (lines 28-34).

Brown reminds us that traumatic experiences are fundamentally irreconcilable to linguistic meaning and, especially, cannot be adequately contained in any standard form. In fact, for combat veterans like Brown, the very fabric and use of language becomes suspect in light of the origin of their trauma. Having once believed in the heroic narratives of nation, democracy, and duty enough to have killed and seen others die for them, Brown inherently distrusts the powers veiled behind conventional linguistic orderings of reality:

> the evening news
> football season
> ends on Sunday
> a woman sings the anthem
> for nothing
> the rest cheering
> (lines 42-47).

As the critic James Dawes adds:

> Wars are born and sustained in rivers of language about what it means to serve the cause, to kill the enemy, and to die with dignity; and they are reintegrated into a collective historical self-understanding through a ritualistic overplus of the language of commemoration. (15)

Or, as brown states in a different poem: "There is an award for this, / a decoration, something / they want us to believe" (*UM*, 38). Once pledged to an oath, soldiers are trained to maximize their volition, to kill and be killed for a fabricated, controlling discourse -- the constructed narrative "cause" of their nation. Ironically, though, in combat, a soldier's language is often reduced to enforced silences, groans of pain, or - at best - the empty, meaningless words of death causing orders and commands. In "Returning Fire" Brown continues, "slopped in mud / in the ache / among believers / paint your face green / and pretend / it's too much" (lines 16-21).

Immersed in inexpressible trauma, Brown presents the soldiers' struggle to maintain any linguistic meaning, even if a whisper. They abandon the narratives that previously defined them to the uncertainty of the jungle where they repeatedly confront that which is beyond expression: their deaths, their gods.

> sandbagged
> they whisper themselves
> dusk in the jungle
> for tongues so pure
> and gone to god
> (lines 69-71; *CTD*, 48-50)

Brown concludes "Returning Fire" with an ambiguous statement of sour hope, an implicit call to resistance. The poem ends with a reminder that the voices of traumatized soldiers, to be truly valued, must be allowed to disrupt convention, else there is no learning from their experiences:

> they never come back
> soaked off into jungle
> they rise only
> in the rough
> second growth
> that follows
> (lines 93-98; *UM*, 48).

Here, perhaps, Brown suggests that the only language that can speak the truth and insights of combat-trauma is that which is "rough" and resistant enough to speak the PTSD "jungle" to those who were never there. Trauma writers, as Brown demonstrates, regain their volition not by capitulating to pre-established narrative patterns, but by "Returning Fire," and by speaking a language to power that power does not yet know how to co-opt. In this regard, Brown's postmodern poetry models a language of resistance that challenges our culture at large, and that specifically

complicates community practices of psychoanalysts who have full faith in the healing powers of narrative conventions.

At the heart of psychology's trust in narrative (re)construction lies the romantic myth that normal, non-traumatized individuals are the primary protagonists/writers of their own identities and stories, where the "meaningful self" is believed to be a product of individual achievement. However, as psychologist Robert Neimeyer notes, individual identity emerges in a much more complex discursive process than traditional PCP narrative therapists offer. Neimeyer, a social constructivist thinker who draws on the work of literary theorist Bakhtin, understands narrative instead as a "dialogic function, the way in which any account is located in the context of a polyphony of competing discourses, and always represents an implicit answer to the real or imagined speech acts of others" (34). Granted, the transformative capacity of language should be a tool for treating traumatized individuals, yet it is equally a mechanism of the dangerous ideologies complicit in subtly sustaining our culture's violence. Once again Brown's poetry leads us in this critique. In the poem "Still Later there are War Stories," Brown debunks the mythical American self-identity as heroic cowboys and, implicitly, our recurring claims of manifest destiny. This imagined identity is contained in the formulaic writing of American popular culture and, even without intention, diminishes the harsh truths of combat-trauma, thus permitting us to choose to once more march proudly into war. Brown writes:

> Another buddy dead.
> There is enough dying
> Gary Cooper will
> ride up, slow and easy
> slide off his horse
> without firing a shot
> and save us all. (*UM*, 42)

Brown reminds us that heroic war stories are part of a powerful discourse that obscures the United States' legacy of violence. For example, all one needs to do is substitute John Rambo for Gary Cooper or the current video game hero for Rambo in the above lines and any first or second Gulf War veteran could make the same critique Brown does.

Further in the same poem Brown connects the plight of Vietnam combat-soldiers even more directly to their likely early childhood indoctrination into the national discourse:

> Daily boy scout excursions
> through brush so thick
> one hour hacking brings you
> twenty feet closer to home,
> down a new tropic trail. The jungle
> loaded, nobody
> comes away in one piece. (*UM*, 42)

To not recognize how institutions as seemingly innocent as the Boy Scouts (Motto: "Be Prepared") may contribute to war making, Brown demonstrates, allows hegemonic myths of soldier-as-hero and U.S.-initiated-war-as-divinely-just, to be continually, uncritically reiterated and reestablished. Established narratives allow us to believe that *our* soldiers, *our* neighbors, *our* children, and *our* culture-at-large will, as Brown rejects, "come away in one piece" from warfare. But, the truth, as demonstrated by Brown's poetry, is that language is "the jungle loaded" with dangerous embedded patterns always rewriting history, always reducing the reality of trauma into a static story of recovery. As Brown ends his poem "When I Am 19 I Was a Medic," "Now they tell me something else- / I've heard it all before / sliding through the grass / to get here" (lines 26-29, *CTD* 52).

Brown's refusal to write about the effects of war in a way conducive to sense-making is an effort to challenge the subsuming of soldiers' and others' lives under the justifying logic of rationality and capital. As Don Ringnalada argues, poets like Brown are more interested in "articulating the levels of nonsense that culminated in [Vietnam]" because nonsense is the epistemological starting point for first understanding, and then combating the footholds of systemic violence and future traumas (ix). Unfortunately, even institutions and disciplines aimed at helping the victims of violence, like psychology, are subject to the larger controlling narratives of culture. That is why the irony of normalized narration is clearest when traumatized individuals, after having discovered that their "normal" assumptive worlds are based on fictive discursive illusions, are then persuaded by psychologists to reintegrate into the same sense-making tropes of linear progression and authorial agency that were already proven false and unreliable by the trauma they experienced in the first place.

As Brown concludes the poem "I Was Dancing Alone in Binh Dinh Province," "I lose track with these guys / how gentle they are / rattles with machine guns / Whoever holds title to this / has a handful / soil hearts move through" (*UM*, 39). Words, titles, and narratives, Brown reminds us, are merely small handfuls of blood soaked soil when compared to the larger terrain of trauma. This incommensurability of normal experience with the overwhelming catastrophe of trauma, and of "gentle" guys with the "rattle" of machine-gun-fire, expresses the contradiction between narrative therapy and the traumatic literatures of resistance to narrative as represented in narrative therapy like Brown's poetry.

The Narrative of Myth, the Myth of Narrative

Psychologist Rollo May claims in *The Cry for Myth* that "the very birth and proliferation of psychotherapy in our contemporary age [results from] the disintegration of our myths" (15). He advocates, therefore, that the reconstruction of myths (myth being for him an equivalent term for "guiding narratives") is not only critical for the treatment of traumatized victims, but for us all. May writes that only in myths, which he sees as the source for shared values, lie the hope of fostering "a new world community [of] sisters and brothers, at last in the same family" (302). I place May in the camp of Dawe's "emancipatory" language theorists. To believe in the healing nature of myth, is to accept the premise that language inherently liberates, creates bonding, fosters compassion, and secures meaning. Regrettably for May's argument, however, in the past century myths and cultural narratives have also

proven themselves powerful enough to encourage and sanction massive violence and trauma against marginal peoples throughout the world.

Unfortunately, in the field of Viet Nam literary studies, the need for myth is just as prevalent. Like May, many scholars of Vietnam War literature feel similarly obliged to find healing myths in the accounts of traumatized combat soldiers. For example, John Hellman, in his seminal work *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam*, suggests that traumatized soldier-writers choose to take their civilian audience with them "on their second journey through Vietnam" in order to perform a type of self-and-communal catharsis through narrative. Hellman writes:

> In their best works, that meant finally moving back toward the realm of fantasy -- of symbolic imagining -- to discover the continuing dimensions of Vietnam as a terrain of the American psyche. Having entered Vietnam as a symbolic landscape, Americans would through highly imaginative narrative art have to find their way back out to American myth, enabling them to journey again forward into history. (Hellman, 137; quoted by Tal, 221)

On a similar note of condoning the perpetuation of fictive and mythical histories, Philip Beidler concludes his own major study of Viet Nam veteran writers, *Re-Writing America: Vietnam Authors in Their Generation*, by suggesting that these writers:

> continue to command us not only to remember but also to imagine. [...] Imagine, they say, out of the embrace of memory a re-writing of the old dream of origin that might still find its flowering in the truest of new generations, a generation of peace. (300)

Elsewhere, Beidler repeatedly praises those soldier-writers who, he suggests, overcome their traumatic suffering through the power of writing "sense-making" accounts and who create meaningful myths of their traumatic experiences.

The conclusions of these thinkers, psychologists and literary critics alike, who inherently trust the healing aspects of language, myth, and narrative, demonstrate just how pervasive conventional cultural ideology is. Normative narratives, if not resisted, can reduce the reality of trauma with even an approving cheer of May's myths of global fraternity, Hellman's belief in such a thing as a progressive history, and Beidler's imaginative dreams of peace and "sense-making" accounts of senseless violence. The assumption that language, narrative, and myth are adequate tools for the liberation and recovery from violence, however, is highly problematic and theoretically flawed.

As Vietnam War literary critic Don Ringnalda might support, personal construct psychology's reliance on normative narrative too often "wastes waste" and "squanders suffering." Ringnalda praises those writers who resist the urge to clear away "the waste" of trauma in order to replace it with sense making narratives and comforting myths. He celebrates those politically engaged trauma writers who "refuse to forget or remember simplistically in tidy categories of the mind; [and who] instead, creatively complicate [normal understanding] by using composted heaps of

destruction" in their writing (157). Rather than couching trauma in the language that usually enacts and excuses it, survivors should be encouraged to resist. Survivors of trauma already know that words are a site of struggle; it is a disservice to them to suggest that they regain their volition only when their stories are contained in normalized language. The work of combat veteran poets proves this point, expressed by Brown, "trained to sleep / where the moon sinks / and bring the darkness home," ("Eating the Forest," *CTD* 56).

I end by returning to the thoughts of a psychologist that this paper began by challenging. Judith Herman writes, "After every war, soldiers have expressed resentment at the general lack of public awareness, interest, and attention; they fear their sacrifices will be quickly forgotten. [...] Even the most congratulatory public ceremonies, however, rarely satisfy the combat veteran's longing for recognition, because of the sentimental distortion of the truth of combat" (70). Psychologists, perhaps more than anyone besides soldiers themselves, recognize the plight of the traumatized soldier. The purpose of this paper is not to discredit their work, but to suggest that the medium of their work, language, is not a neutral component in the recognition process. In fact, because language is the conveyance of thought and identity, it is that which is most distorted by combat trauma. But, more importantly it is also what perpetuates those cultural forms that allow trauma to be ignored and, therefore, repeated. That cycle, if not breakable, must at least be taken into account, by those who work closest with the veterans who have been victims of violence.[1]

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[1] This paper emerged from graduate work with Roger Simpson, Executive Director of The DART Center for Journalism and Trauma, University of Washington.