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Blowin' in the Wind: The Contribution of the Weather Underground to the Canon of Trauma
Literature

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Abstract Title:

Blowin' in the Wind: the contribution of the Weather Underground Organization to the canon of trauma literature

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Abstract:

The literature of the Weather Underground Organization is, to a large degree, a single and superfluous voice in an outpouring of other texts drafted by those who directly experienced the horror of the American War in Vietnam. Declarations, statements, and communiqués penned by the organization, later revised into compilations and memoirs, attempted to rile and rouse a generation of activists. Relying heavily on the notion of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, a German concept of confronting historical trauma, literature of the WUO is shrouded in an intense morality that not only challenges criticisms of the organization, but complicates the designation of domestic terrorism that plagues it. In conjunction with Tim O'Brien's *If I Die in a Combat Zone* and William Ehrhart's *Vietnam-Perkasie*, the works of the Weather Underground generate a definitive commentary on the credibility of memory, the implications of rewriting history, and the complexities of ideology. The Weather Underground, in a manner similar to, but decidedly distinct from the literature of veterans, experienced the trauma of the Vietnam War and attempted to bear witness, to engage their generation and those decades later in a dialogue on the veracity of history and the authenticity of revolution.

Trauma is a complex entity to examine. The literature it inspires, ranging from written works of those who have experienced its impact to accounts from those who witness its repercussions, is idiosyncratic in the memory and presentation of trauma. The Vietnam War, a war held on a pedestal as one of the most gruesome and inexplicable events in American history, produced a substantial portion of trauma literature. Amidst a myriad of other voices, the Weather Underground Organization emerged as a revolutionary conglomerate that would seek to reconfigure the national narrative surrounding the Vietnam War, both before and after it was established. The WUO, in its actions, proved for America the utmost extremes to which political or intellectual conviction could propel its most privileged when ignored or enraged. To encourage an interpretation of the group as a terrorist organization, an authentic representation of the WUO, in terms of both ideology and existence, is lacking. While the understanding of the group as extreme does have some merit, an examination of the body of literature created to accompany the various actions and demonstrations of the WUO unearths something novel about this cluster of wayward academics.

Prairie Fire, Underground, and “Revisiting the Weather Underground,” recount the experience of the Weather Underground Organization as one directly responding to the trauma of participating as combatants in a domestic war, the War to Explain the War, waged in response to the larger historic trauma that defined the Vietnam War. Their literature determines that the trauma incited by the Vietnam War is transmittable through generations, indefinable simply by proximity to combat, and impossible to construe as an event resolved by the progression of history. Each text, in distinct ways, calls for the application of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, a means of processing the past. These three texts, each informed and preserved by the ideology of the Weather Underground, document the Vietnam War from the perspective of those who engaged with it as a cultural trauma – one that eerily repeats in history, un-dissuaded by other

accounts of literature from the Vietnam War.

Fostering a comparison between the works of the WUO and the veteran memoirs crafted by Tim O'Brien and William Ehrhart it becomes apparent that – despite their dismissal in most academic settings – the individuals and ideologies that sprouted within the Weather Underground Organization are not as outlandish as many scholars, theorists, and historians would like to imagine. Generating work that spans three decades, the Weather Underground attempted to assault the comfort of the American populace, not (solely) to inspire trepidation, but to unearth a much more fundamental truth about the absorption and formation of history. Interacting with the trauma of the American War in Vietnam, the Weather Underground Organization attempted to unravel a history saturated by oppression and manipulation from which they, as young, white, privileged intellectuals, largely profited. In doing so, the group broadens the boundaries of trauma by engaging with a process, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, initially coined for the literature produced by German citizens after World War II, providing a new perspective on the trauma of the Vietnam War as a part of the national narrative of the United States.

Relying predominantly on the conceptions of trauma outlined by Kali Tal and Roger Luckhurst, reveals in these three pieces of literature from the Weather Underground Organization – one, *Prairie Fire*, crafted during the height of their existence, and the remaining, “Revisiting the Weather Underground” and *Underground*, published decades after its dissolution – unveil unique, but legitimate responses to the trauma of the war to explain the Vietnam War. *Prairie Fire* serves as a radical interpretation of trauma literature, written and distributed before the conclusion of the Vietnam War. The text solidifies the conception of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* that emerges, for the second time, in the memoirs of Rudd and Ayers published after the dissolution of the WUO when current events seemed to unsettlingly mirror those during the Vietnam War era. Both of the memoirs by Weather memoirs parallel the construction of veteran memoirs from Vietnam War. The four memoirs, two from veterans of Vietnam and two from

former Weather members, are responding to distinct traumas.

I. History of the WUO

The Vietnam War era in the United States housed a “generation...seized with a new vision of the revolutionary possibilities of its future” that even the atrocities of the American War in Vietnam, the Watergate scandal, and the Kent State massacre couldn't squelch (Harold 15). Though current generations have a nostalgic fixation with the period, it was a time of urgency. Its revolutionaries were radical; their causes not a matter of merely pushing boundaries, but enacting legitimate change: visible, tangible, and, in some ways, quantifiable alterations to their environments. The intention with the majority of these efforts was to elicit reform through edification, “the purpose of protest violence, then, is to make the latent violence of the system apparent either by provoking state repression or, at least, by inspiring public reflection on the complex nature of violence. Protest violence therefore aims 'to enlighten'” (Varon 44). As efforts of protest proved counterproductive, particularly in the larger scope of governmental response to those efforts, protest manifested into armed struggle. As Bill Ayers, a notorious figure in the WUO, neatly summarized, in a decade devoid of clarity “you had a responsibility to link your conduct to your consciousness” (Varon, 87).

There is a necessity in compiling a cohesive chronology of the Weather Underground Organization – a tremendous feat as the bulk of their history is contested by other organizations and complicated by conjecture. Sprung from the embers of Students for a Democratic Society, the WUO lasted less than a decade. In that short time frame, however, numerous conversations on the inadequacies and inconsistencies of the organization ensued. Fraught by jarring disorganization, the history of the WUO relies heavily on the orations of other radical organizations and on similar attempts by former members to synthesize their own chaotic history.

Fixating on a few pivotal events in national history, but honing in on essential turning points within the organization itself, this next section is to provide a historical foundation for the emergence of the Weather Underground Organization that will prove vital to interacting with the literature of the organization, as well as the works of Tim O'Brien and William Ehrhart. In their evolution from the latter portion of the 1960's through to the end of the 1970's, the WUO were, in their own understanding, progressing together. From the perspectives of outsiders, however, the cracks in the foundation of the group became readily apparent. The simplest way to discuss the maturation of the Weather Underground Organization is to dissect it in three sections, each marking a transition in the size and psyche of the group. Beginning first with a brief context for the rest of their history, this section will then progress with an examination of the WUO from their origins as the Revolutionary Youth Movement in Students for a Democratic Society, to their establishment as the Weathermen, and finally their retreat underground, marking the group for the duration of history as "The Weather Underground Organization."

The origins of the WUO are clouded with inconsistencies - the bulk of which stemmed from a struggle to interject into revolutionary discourse and practice with an established ideology. The anti-war movement in the United States manifested in a number of different ways, from the emergence of "hippie" culture, to the pacifist movement, to the Yippies, and, finally, to efforts of armed struggle. A staggering number of young people saw themselves as part of this larger movement, to the extent that by the start of the 1970's "more than one million young Americans considered themselves 'revolutionaries'" (Varon 37). The Weather Underground Organization, simultaneously "graceful, awkward, and volatile," sprouted during a period rife with a sense of activism and reform (Varon 291). Part of what makes the WUO both enigmatic and irksome is their inability to be confined to a particular category: they were revolutionaries, but not for a specific cause; terrorists, but not bloodthirsty; idiotic, but not unprincipled. Occasionally compared with powerhouses of revolution like the Black Panther Party, the WUO

never possessed the organization or the internal instruction to ever ascend to that same level of notoriety, authority, or influence. It did, however, have the potential to achieve those heights. SDS, the group from which the WUO began, had established itself within the revolutionary community as it was “for years the New Left's most important organization” (Varon 7). Present on most college campuses, SDS was a staple in the anti-war effort even as the American War in Vietnam relentlessly intensified; there was perhaps no faction more active than Columbia (University) SDS which fostered Mark Rudd and a number of other soon-to-be notorious members of “Weatherman” (Berger 25). Despite its esteemed reception, SDS began to crumble towards the end of the 1960's, overwhelmed by an ideological split (sparked by the early members of Weatherman) that proved fatal. The Revolutionary Youth Movement and the Progressive Labor Party were two entities housed under the umbrella of SDS, but had fundamentally oppositional views on the role of revolution, from what population it should attempt to motivate to the ways in which it should incite that action. PL (Progressive Labor) focused on the industrial workers of America, and “clung to the idea that the industrial working class was the exclusive agent of revolutionary change” (Varon 46). RYM, conversely, relied heavily on “confrontational action, an in-your-face politics, and their boisterous, even anarchic, spirit” to encourage an adoption of militancy (Varon 47). The Flint War Council in 1969, largely through the manipulation of players like Mark Rudd, Bill Ayers, Jeff Jones, and Bernardine Dohrn, decided the fate of SDS, leaving it largely in the hands of the RYM; this, however, did not cause intellectual differences to dissipate (later splitting into RYM I and RYM II, this time conflicted over the use of violence) (Berger 79). Soon after dismantling SDS, a fundamental staple of New Left politics, “Weatherman was born” (Varon 49).

For those that transitioned into Weatherman – later to confusingly switch to the more inclusive title of “Weathermen” - the intensity of their previous ideological foundation exploded. The distribution of “an analytical and programmatic thesis entitled 'You Don't Need a

Weatherman to Know Which Way the Wind Blows” shortly before the collapse of SDS established the group's radical platform (Harold 21). With a “trademark thick and colorful rainbow with a slash of angry lightning cutting through it,” Weatherman relinquished its recent control of SDS and was released from the confines of expectation and responsibility within SDS. Embarking on a whirlwind effort to revamp the social structure of the United States through violence, Weather members began a system to radicalize the American population into action (Ayers 26). Where the PL segment of SDS believed that the industrial workers of the United States were the key to revolution in America, Weathermen understood the focal point of recruitment was a community already establishing a radical movement: the Black community. Revolution could not be concocted by those fiscally and ideologically reliant on the capitalist system of the United States; instead its success relied on the efforts of those oppressed by that same structure; “given the centuries of anti-Black oppression and the level of unity among Black communities, 'Weatherman' said, it was they who were leading the struggle inside this country” (Berger 81-2). To do so, however, the group paradoxically fixated on the white working class; their fascination with white America was not to generate a revolution, but to show solidarity to those in progress through the efforts of the Black Panther Party (BPP), the Black Liberation Army, and the Student Afro-American Society. As “people in the United States (including Weatherpeople) were infected by the 'white privilege, racism, [and] male supremacy' endemic to this society, Ayers said, Weather had to combat these ideas wherever they were manifest – in themselves and in others,” and the best way to do so was to act in “solidarity” with a larger movement (Berger 96). Though their foundation was understood internally to highlight the “urgent need for whites to put their bodies on the line in solidarity with the Black movement – to put themselves, in Bernardine Dohrn's words, 'between Black freedom fighters and the police,’” their attempts to do so appropriated the authority the Panthers and other Black Power movements had sacrificed momentarily to attain (Varon 121). Fred Hampton, one of the leaders of the BPP

and a revolutionary whose assassination is cited (and much to the chagrin of many Civil Rights activists) as heavily impacting the Weathermen in their early formation, determined that “we [the BPP] do not support people who are anarchistic, opportunistic, adventuristic, and Custeristic [i.e., suicidal]” (Varon 81). The rate at which the violence of the Weathermen escalated, partnered with the rampant disarray of its internal structure, contributed to their categorization as an extremist, unbridled group of misfits; an interpretation that, a year later, would define the group on a national scale.

The Townhouse explosion, the event that forced the Weathermen underground and radically redefined its premise, served as a national introduction for the group. On “March 6, 1970, [Dustin] Hoffman,” who lived in the townhouse adjacent to one occupied by Diana Oughton, Teddy Gold, and Terry Robbins, “believed the fire marshals who said that a gas pipe had exploded in the basement of 18 W. 11th Street” (Berger 127). The reality of that day is far different – an explosion sparked not by faulty piping or wiring, but by an ill-constructed bomb, served to be much more than a quirky celebrity anecdote; for the WUO, the Townhouse explosion illustrated how drastically their own revolutionary ideology could be modified to validate the type of violence to which its members were enthusiastically opposed. The individuals who died in the townhouse explosion were a part of the Weathermen, but a small cluster of individuals who no longer were satisfied with the conundrum that defined Weathermen (principled violence), had constructed a plan “to attack human targets” (Varon, 180). By March of 1970, the Weathermen had already “made violence the measure of authenticity,” but the accidental explosion at the Townhouse pointed to a lack of cohesion detrimental to an already shaky foundation (Varon 102). Weathermen had already carried out a handful of actions, including fire-bombing the home of the judge overseeing the Black Panther trial, but the intent had always to be avoid human targets, an ideology the members of the Townhouse collective abandoned without warning. For the Weathermen and their observers, “the townhouse explosion

was another chilling eruption in a climate of escalating confusion and violence, and sent the Weathermen into an ideological and intellectual whirlwind (Varon 176). It, additionally, established the organization's long run on the radars of the FBI, "in May 1970, the FBI announced 'one of the most intensive manhunts in history' for nine suspected Weather leaders" (Berger 132). The townhouse explosion fascinated historians, politicians, and law enforcement equally, but it stunted the Weathermen inextricably; although the organization arguably became more violent after 1970, their move underground afforded them the ability to ensure that, never again, would there be the conscious consumption of human life. Any "actions prior to the townhouse blast had not injured anyone, despite the group's apocalyptic rhetoric," but this singular event served to define the organization for the entirety of its history; aided by the "prohibition on lethal actions" established after the townhouse disaster (Berger 131; Varon 12). The loss of three of Weather members was jarring, it instigated a shift in ideology and a transformation in their literature, but it alerted the Weathermen to the extremes even of their already radical ideology.

The evolution of Weathermen into the Weather Underground was not indicative of an apology or admittance of guilt; rather it was an escape from the pervasive eyes of law enforcement and an outraged public, into a countercultural movement. As the group evaded the FBI (largely due to their status as white elites) and escaped the critiques of the American public, they also established a system through which to carry out their actions: they first carried out surveillance on a prospective location, planted a device, and then "issued a warning to prevent injury" (Varon 184). An underground existence "opened up a new site from which to respond to the crimes of the state. By attacking the halls of power, the group was attempting to retaliate while also pushing people to connect the particular issue to the broader system of imperialism," and, despite commentaries to the contrary, they did so with their own code of ethics (Berger 149). Their use of communiqués and declarations, delivered through a covert and comprehensive

underground network, “were political education,” meant to ensure that each bombings had substantial context, often citing particular incidents either in Vietnam or at home (Berger 176). This fundamental element of the WU is often ignored or dismissed because of an early branding as radicals, extremists, or terrorists, but it is worth noting that “the impact of Weather is not to be judged by its military or economic damage, which was admittedly tiny. Instead, its impact was in broadening the contours of struggle and adding to the range of responses to U.S. Imperialism – a moral, pedagogical, and militant form of guerrilla theater with a bang” (Berger 287). As the Seventies wore on, the WU began to lose its fervor, as did governmental enthusiasm for their capture. By 1986 - after the unfortunate and botched “Brinks Robbery” that killed three security guards and imprisoned three former WU members – the group had disbanded, but merely a handful of its members ever stood trial or faced prosecution for their actions; even so, their resurfacing did indicate for many the “final obituaries of withered radicalism” (Varon 298). However, few Weather members will ever renounce the ideological scruples that inspired and sustained the organization for just under a decade. Twenty years later, when the possibility of war in both Iraq and Afghanistan ignited a media frenzy around Vietnam Era literature and anti-war movements, there was still something pervasive about the ideology that carried the Weather Underground, for both those that admired and admonished the group.

The Weather Underground, despite its frequent name changes and sporadic ideological shifts, attempted to do something novel: the WUO yearned to “bring the war home” (Forley 17). In attempting to do so, however, a number of missteps were made; unnecessary lives were lost and structural errors ultimately contributed to the downfall of an organization that could have had a tremendous impact. Formed “from a cauldron of Black Power and state repression, of national liberation and cultural shifts, of revolutionary hope with steadfast determination,” the promise of the WUO was indicative of a profound shift in America (Berger 7). In unique ways, the WUO engaged in warfare and, although it may not fit precisely with conventional

understandings of combat or commitment, its members engaged with a trauma that mimicked those of veterans of the American War in Vietnam. The intent of analyzing their literature in conjunction with samples of veteran literature of the Vietnam War is not to diminish the contributions of either experience; the purpose of analysis is, instead, to outline how dramatically the trauma of the Vietnam War permeated through lines of combat and geographical boundaries. Weathermen understood that everything, from privilege to politics was “without meaning if the world no longer holds together” and therefore in times of conflict “people choose to fight – one way or the other” (Kopkind: Jacobs 503). Examining the literature generated by the organization in its heyday, as well works produced decades after (in a similar political circumstance), evidence of a deep-seated trauma emerges; engaging with WUO literature in conjunction veteran literature from the same period produces an odd commentary on the canon of trauma and the experience of war. A weird amalgamation of fugitives, “guerillas,” and witnesses to the American War in Vietnam, the WUO sought to take action – their attempts were largely misguided, but the foundation of those actions were rooted in an authentic yearning to act in a period where a dichotomy on the part of the American public between action and observation negated the urge of all Americans to do so. Throughout their history, although action was the primary purpose of the organization, the WUO generated literature to substantiate, clarify, and popularize their comprehension of the world.

The Weather Underground Organization transcends categorization and the brief foundation for the organization established here is not indicative of its rich history. Comprehending, even marginally, WUO history eases analysis of the three constructions of trauma literature by the organization and by former Weather members. A revolutionary entity that defined by violence, the Weather Underground Organization was, as an organization, rife with potential, its members privileged in more way than one. Had the WUO been less extreme or

more cohesive, it may have been capable of implementing the new social order it aspired to achieve. In their attempts to do so, the members of the Weather Underground incited their own brand of war; one that generated literature that interacts with trauma in a way that mirrors the constructions of veterans deciphering an entirely separate brand of trauma derived from their experience as soldiers in the Vietnam War. Examining the literature of the WUO does not entirely clarify its history, but *Prairie Fire*, “Revisiting the Weather Underground,” and *Underground* explain the conviction that carried the WUO and its members – displaying, perhaps unintentionally, an interaction with the trauma of the Vietnam War that alters conventional understandings of trauma literature, from its creation to its purpose.

II. An Introduction to Trauma

Literature is frequently a vessel for catharsis and, even more often, used as a platform for larger commentaries on a societal or historical reality; it is more inspiring for social reform than even the most intense combat or protest because of its ability to be interpreted. As trauma literature addresses a number of different personal, cultural, and historical assaults and offenses, the characterization of trauma is varied; the simplest description being Freud’s notion that trauma is “any experience which calls up distressing affects – such as those of fright, anxiety, shame, or physical pain” (Luckhurst 46). Trauma is inherently multifaceted, but for examining the literature of the WUO feeds off of Freud’s definition and manifests as an interaction with suffering that radically reconfigures the framework of thought for the individuals that experienced it. To use Caruth’s words, as quoted in Jenn Williamson’s text, trauma can be “understood as a wound inflicted upon the mind, trauma recurs precisely because of the mind’s inability to articulate the truth of that experience and its psychological effect due to the failure to 'fully assimilate' it as it occurs” (Williamson 748). Frequently, trauma is construed as an individual disease; for the WUO, the trauma of the Vietnam War perpetuated a cultural trauma, in which the entire culture,

not solely Weather members, were traumatized from the Vietnam War. The literature of the Weather Underground Organization serves as a bridge between the conceptions of the Vietnam War merely as a scar on the history of the United States, exposing it as a present reality even thirty years after its conclusion. An essential distinction to comprehend is that, though the trauma of the Vietnam War inspired both the literature of the WUO and the memoirs of O'Brien and Ehrhart, these authors and their literary productions are interacting with distinct forms of trauma: the Vietnam memoirs largely interacting with an individual trauma; the WU literature approaching a cultural trauma. Because of the contested space the WUO, in terms of its actions and its members, holds in the narrative of Vietnam, the literature of Weather members cannot be construed as interacting with the same trauma as those of Vietnam veterans. Tal and Luckhurst provide a framework through which to examine the texts of both the WUO and the memoirs of two veterans of the Vietnam War, outlining a spectrum on which each of these texts coincide and challenge one another; all, nevertheless, authentic pieces of literature documenting and engaging with the trauma of the Vietnam War.

Trauma literature, in a distinct and dynamic way, engages with a fundamental need for the majority of humanity to express loss, confusion, or experience – in Kali Tal's words, trauma literature is “written from the need to tell and retell the story of the traumatic experience, to make it 'real' both to the victim and to the community” (Tal 21). Articulations of trauma have the potential of countering or unraveling a previously accepted history, and frequently do precisely that. Expressing and investigating the untold stories and uncovered calamities that accompany any event, literature of trauma shatters conventionally applied frameworks of understanding by allowing those who experienced the event to detailing its realities. Synthesizing the components of trauma literature is not an easy task as the canon is expansive, incorporating testimony and investigation of a variety of tremendous and harrowing events. Roger Luckhurst and Kali Tal are

theorists that hold conflicting interpretations of trauma, particularly the role that literature plays for authors and readers of trauma. Each theorist contributes to this analysis of trauma literature in two distinct ways: Luckhurst outlining the authority of secondary victims to construct literature of trauma, Tal determining what it means to “bear witness” to trauma and constructing three “markers” of trauma that make the process identifiable in literature. For analysis of WUO literature, the conflicting conceptions of trauma held by the theorists complement one another: Luckhurst providing the justification for the examination of WUO literature as literature of trauma, Tal facilitating the analysis of five distinct pieces of trauma literature by dissecting how each text bears witness to the trauma of the Vietnam War.

The act of “bearing witness” to trauma can manifest uniquely in literature, incorporating texts housed in different genres, written in different styles but unified by a similar intent: to testify to the experience of trauma. Tal determines that the “urge to bear witness” is a fundamental component of trauma literature and defines the task as an urge to “carry the tale of horror back to the halls of 'normalcy' and to testify to people the truth of their [the author's] experience” (Tal 120). Narratives of trauma require the author to determine their experience as one of isolation, attesting to an account of war often not explored, separate from conventional or standardized accounts of the traumatic event. The purpose of this literature is multifaceted, leading some to argue that authors of trauma create literature simply as a means of rationalizing their experience; for Tal, trauma literature possesses a larger goal. Bearing witness is an act that directly contributes to “changing the order of things as they are, and working to prevent the enactment of similar horrors in the future” (Tal 121). Trauma literature benefits its author(s) by providing a forum to allow for enhanced personal understanding of a traumatic event, but the loftier task of bearing witness is evoking comprehension in a larger audience. Because there are stark variations that occur within the construction of trauma literature, Tal denotes three markers

of trauma that define texts as genuine pieces of trauma literature – all of which tie into the nature of these literary constructions as an urge to bear witness to an event.

Determining three distinct markers embedded in literature of trauma, Tal establishes a framework for analyzing trauma literature from the Vietnam War that accounts for the inclusion of narratives that challenge a nationally or historically accepted myth surrounding the war. The national narrative surrounding Vietnam discourages alternative experiences within the war by declaring that “if you were there then this is your story – and if it isn't your story, you weren't really there” (Tal 11). This perception of Vietnam War literature is undeniably flawed; it perpetuates a cycle of myth and fabrication surrounding a heavily contested period of history, dismissing voices that could aid in constructing an authentic understanding. Tal's response to this inadequate conception of trauma is a checklist of sorts, a series of elements that identify essential components of trauma present in any literature that attempts to bear witness to a traumatic event. The first marker is “the composition of community of trauma survivors,” requiring interaction from the author with the community of survivors with which they identify (Tal 17). A second component of Tal's checklist is dissecting the “composition of the community of perpetrators,” and the impact of this population on the trauma inflicted by the Vietnam War (Tal 17). The third and final component is examination of “the relationship between communities of victims and perpetrators” (Tal 17). Each of these elements serves as scaffolding, present in literary constructions that can be authentically determined as pieces of trauma literature. The application of this framework to the literature of the WUO, as well as the memoirs of Ehrhart and O'Brien, though repetitive, outlines the similarities and discrepancies between five distinct manifestations of trauma that stemmed from interaction with the Vietnam War. Tal's tenets of trauma are, however, only helpful after addressing the conflicted role of Weather Underground authors as secondary victims of trauma.

Central to the study of trauma literature are questions of whether “the right to speak of trauma should be limited to its primary victims” and how to “claim ‘secondary’ status without risking appropriation” (Luckhurst 3). Roger Luckhurst responds to these quandaries by determining that trauma is transmittable. Survivors of trauma possess a “double vision” of the world “refuse[ing] both to repress the past and to renounce the present; they take as their responsibility the impossible task of bearing witness both to what we are, and to what we could be” (Luckhurst 114). This distinct perspective makes literature of survivors a profound forum through which trauma can be understood. Textual constructions of trauma from survivors “violently open passageways between systems that were once discreet, making unforeseen connections that distress or confound” (Luckhurst 3). Serving as gateways into the experience of trauma, the literary contributions of survivors divulge to a larger population a new perception of an event. Luckhurst, unlike other theorists in his field, believes that literature can convey trauma so explicitly that it can be transmittable to readers. This notion of transmittability determines that trauma “can move outwards in an unpredictable proliferation from the original wounds” debunking conventional notions that constructions of trauma literature are only authentic when crafted by primary actors within it (Luckhurst 29). Luckhurst's theory of transmittability informs an understanding of trauma as an entity that allows for authors to redefine it for their own purpose, without wholly abdicating the authenticity of its existence. In the most colloquial of phrases: it allows for authors to hijack the trauma of the Vietnam War. Establishing the merit of alternate voices in construction of trauma literature, Luckhurst's interpretation of trauma is somewhat extreme, but serves as a focal point through which to investigate the literature of the WUO as constructions of trauma.

Though Tal and Luckhurst's conceptions of trauma do not wholly coalesce with one another, the union of these two perspectives of trauma serves as an entry point for discussion of

the literature of the Weather Underground as trauma literature. Each theorist explores solutions to the limitations of trauma theory in its application to Vietnam War literature; the recourse taken by each theorist in altering the bounds of trauma substantiates the claim that the literature of the WUO is, indeed, a product of trauma. The notion of transmittability is more pertinent in examining the works of the WUO that are responding to the trauma of the Vietnam War outside of the confines of combat, as a cultural trauma. Tal's notion of bearing witness and the indicators of trauma crafted by the theorist are the driving force of this analysis. Imposing Tal's framework on each piece of literature, reveals cohesions between pairings of the four memoirs: Ayers and Ehrhart formulating one perspective on the trauma of the Vietnam, Rudd and O'Brien providing an alternative viewpoint. The ways in which each author interacts with trauma is similar, but it is worth reiterating that the trauma experienced by O'Brien and Ehrhart is highly individual, distinct from the larger cultural or historical trauma that grounds the majority of the Weather Underground literature. The simplest way to articulate these comparisons is to determine that each pair falls on an opposite pole of a spectrum: Ayers and Ehrhart using literature to convey the experience of their authors during Vietnam (tying into Tal's conception of bearing witness), but the memoirs of Rudd and O'Brien attempting to push it a step further, to engage analytically and critically with their respective experiences with distinct forms of trauma. It is this distinction that explicates on the existence and maturation of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* within the literature of the Weather Underground; not only in the two Weather memoirs crafted after the conclusion of the Vietnam War, but in *Prairie Fire*.

Vergangenheitsbewältigung

Where Tal and Luckhurst provide the justification for discerning how three literary constructions of the WUO effectively function as literature of trauma (and how veteran memoirs define the vast majority of the literature from the Vietnam War era), *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*

is the contribution that the literature of the WUO makes to a larger canon of trauma. The relationship between trauma and *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* is mildly convoluted. Trauma defines the process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*; it can be viewed as a subcategory of the larger definition of trauma, but serves a decisively different function in its interaction with trauma. *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* is a method of evaluating how a body of people could remain bystanders to a tremendous historical atrocity, functioning as a collective process to rework a traumatic event into a larger framework of understanding. Labyrinthine even in its definition, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* was first utilized in conjunction with trauma theory in a way to explain the response of Good Germans to the Holocaust, “a symptom of Germany's difficulty in confronting and working through its Nazi past” (Varon 15). The term, essentially, defines the process through which an un-traumatized population can “come to terms with the problematic past” (Buse 195). The process was defined shortly after the conclusion of World War II in the literature of East Germans, but expanded to the population of German citizens who could not justify their paralysis when directly confronted by the gruesome details of the Holocaust. The Holocaust illustrated for a global population the depths of human depravity that many silently condoned or ignored. The Vietnam War is emblematic of a period in American history where, although decidedly distinct from the Holocaust, an illogical genocide was occurring – smaller in scope, but proving to define a great deal of U.S. history.

Although the application of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* has evaded much of the discourse surrounding the Vietnam War, it is lingering in the construction of each of these five pieces of literature; it is, however, central to the purpose of Weather Underground literature. Comprehending *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* depicts the position of witness to war as one where “guilt and responsibility are ambiguous: the victim and the victimizer are one and the same” (Silberman 535). If this dual role goes unacknowledged in the larger course of history, then true

interaction with the Vietnam War will continue to evade the general populace. The term relies heavily on Luckhurst's notion of transmittability; just as interaction with trauma is varied, the process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* requires explication in its various manifestations. The emergence of the term in its relationship to the Weather Underground Organization is relatively radical. The trauma experienced by Weather members in their experience(s) during the Vietnam War, in their comprehension of it, perpetuated a larger cultural trauma.

Vergangenheitsbewältigung is, by its definition, a process that can only end with a substantial cultural shift. This recognition defines *Prairie Fire*, necessitating and calling for an interaction with the repercussions of the Vietnam War before its conclusion as a way to compel an interaction with *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in an unconventional timeframe. The later memoirs of Weather members serve to reinforce the veracity of the response by the WUO, but similarly display an interaction with *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* as it has progressed throughout the course of history.

Prairie Fire, Underground, and “Revisiting the Weather Underground” are defined by an interaction with *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, *Prairie Fire* serving as a radical example of trauma literature because of its interaction with *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* before the construction of a narrative surrounding the Vietnam War. *Prairie Fire* hoped to engage their present-day society with the trauma of the past, the expectation being that this confrontation would compel that same population to revolt against a contemporary trauma. As the only production of the Weather Underground as a conglomerate, *Prairie Fire* can, simply, serve as a revolutionary manifesto written to explain the existence of the WUO. However, as a narrative that was crafted “in order to explain, rationalize, and define events” *Prairie Fire* is the outlier in this compilation of Vietnam War era literature, a construction of trauma that relies on Luckhurst's idea of the transmittability of trauma (Tal 76). Through literature, it attempts to transmit a comprehension

of trauma to a larger audience, dealing with trauma as combatants in the two separate wars spurred by the American War in Vietnam. As a political statement, *Prairie Fire* is an outlier in a larger compilation of memoirs; its inclusion, however, is imperative to comprehending the presence of Vergangenheitsbewältigung within the literature of the Weather Underground, pointing to the larger claim for its literature as literature of trauma. The process that began in *Prairie Fire* is called for again in the memoirs of Rudd and Ayers, each witnessing the seeming resurgence of the same cultural trauma in early 2000's America.

IV. *Prairie Fire*

Prairie Fire, perhaps more than any of the other samples of Vietnam War literature, complicates Tal's tenets of trauma. It changes the conversation of trauma literature entirely, injecting Vergangenheitsbewältigung in a novel time frame and providing a foundation for the memoirs of Rudd and Ayers. As a revolutionary manifesto it does not possess the same literary features as a memoir, but remains a narrative. Determining the Vietnam War to be a single chapter in a larger historical trauma, one for which every American is accountable, *Prairie Fire* hyperbolizes the trauma, and timeline, of the Vietnam War as a never-ending conflict – one that no one can emerge from as a “survivor.” *Prairie Fire* declares that exposure to the realities of the Vietnam War sparks a realization that all Americans are victims of Vietnam, that as “the treacherous nature of US power was revealed as we began to comprehend Hiroshima, napalm, slavery, lynching, capital punishment, rape, Indian reservations. We came to see that change is violently opposed every step of the way” (*Prairie Fire* 247). This does not create survivors, but victims of trauma that are defined not by a particular event, but a historical reality. Clarified by a quote from Cathy Caruth, used by Luckhurst to explain the transmittability of trauma, *Prairie Fire* was outlining the trauma of Vietnam as “a system of history,” rather than an idiosyncratic experience” (Luckhurst 4). This powerful, historically condoned trauma disavows the notion that

there can be a community of survivors as everyone is a victim and benefactor of history. *Prairie Fire* mandated that all Americans are victims of trauma, only requiring to be awakened, to “see the horror of empire and the real nature of the monster we live in” (Prairie Fire 271). Seeking to edify this community of victims of the Vietnam War, the anticipation was that these victims of trauma would soon become combatants in the “War to Explain the War” (Prairie Fire 282). For both the Vietnam War and the “War to Explain the War” there are definitive perpetrators, but even this characterization does not fall neatly into Tal's category.

Prairie Fire establishes those that profit, however unconsciously, from the continuation of the Vietnam War as perpetrators of trauma. *Prairie Fire* addresses perpetrators of trauma as both entities and individuals, from those situated in the combat zones of Vietnam through to their own revolutionary community. The text identifies that the meaning of perpetrator adjusts for these different contexts noting that “to William Calley and the perpetrators of the My Lai war crimes the unarmed Vietnamese villagers including the children were the faceless and nonhuman 'enemy'” (Prairie Fire 322). This is decisively different from the mentality that defines everyday citizens of the United States as perpetrators of trauma, because it defines perpetrators of trauma as those that emerge as victims of culture. Declaring that America is “...a deathly culture. It beats its children and discards its old people, imprisons its rebels and drinks itself to death. It breeds and educates us to be socially irresponsible, arrogant, ignorant, and anti-political. The most technologically advanced people in the world and the most politically and socially backward” (Prairie Fire 381). This characterization is less accusatory, but still determines the guilt of this population. The trauma that drove the Vietnam War stems from a societal structure that manipulates its inhabitants, lulls them into positions of immobility; the perpetrators and victims of trauma portrayed in *Prairie Fire* are equally reliant on this system of oppression and trauma. The community of perpetrators in the Vietnam War is such an expansive population because of a

structure that “involves and implicates people in a system over which they have little control; a system which includes unprecedented slaughter through continuous wars, genocide” (Prairie Fire 241). Indoctrination into this system is not conscious, but afforded by birth, privilege, and ignorance. *Prairie Fire* is unrelenting in its establishment of a vast and varied community of perpetrators, all of which are simultaneously potential victims of trauma. The text, however, is equally generous in its understanding of the relationship between perpetrators and victims as a fluid one.

Prairie Fire chastises the entirety of the American public for its inability to recognize the Vietnam War as a momentous trauma and the text establishes a relationship between victims and perpetrators of trauma defined, ultimately, by the action taken after the consumption of the text. *Prairie Fire*, unlike many other constructions of trauma literature, circulated during the event that it sought to respond to, when there was still time to act in response to the trauma of the Vietnam War. The text routinely dismisses the notion that too much time had elapsed for change to occur, reiterating that “time is pressing, people are already dying. Lives are wasted and worn. Life itself depends on our ability to deal a swift death blow to a monster” (Prairie Fire 383). Because of its conception of the Vietnam War as an extension of a larger trauma, *Prairie Fire* never envisions a point of conclusion for the trauma it is documenting. The aspirations of Weathermen, cohesively chronicled in *Prairie Fire*, were rooted in the conclusion of Vietnam, but extended far beyond a singular achievement. *Prairie Fire* enacted a form of premature Vergangenheitsbewältigung, seeking to prompt the American populace to interact with the trauma of the Vietnam War as both a past and present conflict. A task of too great a magnitude for a single generation, much less through a single literary work, *Prairie Fire* relies on the ideal that “if they can only make us see what they have, we too will be changed: we too will see as they see” (Tal 131). *Prairie Fire* sought to incite a revolution that interacted with a trauma far

beyond the parameters of Vietnam and did so as the single cohesive text of the Weather Underground; it failed astronomically. The foundation it laid for later constructions of trauma literature by Weather members, however, was vital to the consideration of the literary canon of the WUO as one worthy of inclusion as trauma literature.

Prairie Fire tried to unravel a trauma that defined the entirety of American history, an undertaking that inadvertently engaged in the premature application of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, presented an argument for the transmittability of trauma, and provided a literary account of trauma that would fortify the memoirs of Mark Rudd and Bill Ayers decades later. Prairie Fire serves as an interpretation of the trauma of the Vietnam War that negates future outcries of complacency or ignorance of the travesties that occurred in the period, because “the Vietnam war exposed so much” (Prairie Fire 282). Prairie Fire made every American citizen accountable for the existence and escalation of Vietnam, as individuals that profited and condoned from its travesties. It defined the trauma of the Vietnam War as a transmittable and inheritable entity. The text does not fit wholly within the confines of Tal's conceptions of trauma literature, but it does document the trauma of the Vietnam War as the WUO understood it. The foundation that Prairie Fire constructed was revisited, expanded, and challenged by the Underground and “Revisiting the Weather Underground,” elevating these memoirs to distinctive constructions of trauma literature by allowing them to engage not only with experience, but with a previously documented trauma.

***V. Vietnam-Perkasie* and “Revisiting the Weather Underground”**

Vietnam-Perkasie and “Revisiting the Weather Underground” are partnered with one another because of the stark parallels that emerge, not within the literary construction of each, but in the inability to allow their interaction with the trauma of the Vietnam War to radically reconfigure their subjectivity towards their own participation during the time period. Both texts

are each crafted by authors who are able to recount their experience within the Vietnam War, but display an inability or unwillingness to truly come to terms with that history. Rather than processing their respective experiences within the Vietnam War, the pair shirk the responsibility of comprehension to a larger community, from which they are both exempt. Ehrhart depicts his interaction with the Vietnam War as a betrayal of his conviction that manifests only consternation and isolation from his peers in both war and community. Ayers elaborates on a similar progression, even though his writing emerges nearly three decades after the conclusion of the Vietnam War. Both authors recognize their interactions with distinct forms of trauma spurred by the Vietnam War, but ultimately craft literature that refuses to interact with fault on the part of either author. Neither account is devoid of trauma; both Ayers and Ehrhart were traumatized in distinct ways by the Vietnam War, and each is rooted in the understanding that the respective experiences of the authors in Vietnam were wholly transformative.

Vietnam-Perkasie

Vietnam-Perkasie depicts the trauma of the Vietnam War as a wholly individual event - one that shattered the cultural conceptions of war held by its author. Chronicling his experience in Vietnam through firsthand narration, Ehrhart reconstructs the trauma of his journey into and out of the combat zones of the Vietnam War. *Vietnam-Perkasie*, unlike *If I Die*, illustrates the traumatic experience of the Vietnam War from the perspective of a narrator who has not revisited it as a veteran. Ehrhart bears witness to his traumatic experience in the Vietnam War without acknowledging the passage of time between the traumatic experience and the literary documentation of it. *Vietnam-Perkasie* fits neatly into what Tal denotes as survival literature, texts that fixate on “the shattering of individual myth and the transformation of the protagonist” (Tal 131). Engaging with Tal's tenets of trauma as a soldier experiencing trauma in real time, *Vietnam-Perkasie* determines a community of survivors, a community of perpetrators, and the

relationship between those two entities that are oppositional to the presentation of these same categories in *If I Die*. Approaching the trauma of the Vietnam War by recreating the experience of a soldier within it, *Vietnam-Perkasie* details Ehrhart's experience as a recitation of pure memory. Engaging with trauma by reconstructing it, *Vietnam-Perkasie* modifies Tal's tenets of trauma by establishing its narrator as a survivor of trauma, pinpointing a community of perpetrators for that trauma that is more expansive even than O'Brien's, and presenting the relationship between the two as one that can never be broached. *Vietnam-Perkasie* determines the trauma of the Vietnam War as one that forever altered the perception of the world for its narrator; Ehrhart, tortured not by his actions in the war, but by the construction of the world he returned to after the conclusion of the Vietnam War.

Application of Tal's initial tenet - establishing a community of trauma survivors - *Vietnam-Perkasie* establishes a single survivor of trauma. A voluntary participant within the Vietnam War, Ehrhart enlisted as a Marine and saw it as a requirement, "an obligation...Your country gets into it, you got a duty to support your country, period. You want freedom and all, you got to be willing to sacrifice for it" (Ehrhart 271). Ehrhart, driven by an understanding that engagement with war is a mandate of being a citizen, enters into combat somewhat enthusiastically. As the text progresses the narrator of *Vietnam-Perkasie* grows jaded – not towards the travesties he witnesses of war, but by the disappointment of his existence as a soldier. *Vietnam-Perkasie* chronicles the experience of a trauma survivor who is realizing, in real-time for the reader, that war does not coalesce with the "vital American myth [is] that the good guys with guns beat the bad guys with guns" (Tal 139). A cultural myth that, for the narrator of *Vietnam-Perkasie*, was intensely personal, Ehrhart's status as a survivor of trauma redefines his perception of the Vietnam War and this larger cultural myth surrounding warfare. For a soldier who had not only witnessed the trauma of the Vietnam War, but also experienced the destruction of an individual myth, the return from Vietnam proved as traumatic as either

experience.

There is one image that drives Ehrhart for the entirety of *Vietnam-Perkasie*, one that is quintessentially American in nature:

I thought of the vision I'd carried for months: me and a pretty American girl sitting at a booth drinking Coke, smiling and smiling, a simple welcome home from the alien ricefields and sand barrens and jungles of Asia. I'd rehearsed the scene a thousand times through the endless days and nights alone: the Coke, the smiles, perhaps a brief touching of the hands before we went our separate ways. (Ehrhart 276)

A juvenile portrait of a soldier unaware of the larger ramifications of the war that his convictions had led him to participate within; the trauma of realizing this idyllic future was now impossible made Ehrhart's experience within Vietnam traumatic, a reality only fully realized after leaving the combat zone. Ehrhart returned to a nation exhausted by constant, yet incomplete exposure to the Vietnam War, disinterested in celebrating its soldiers. It was this population that served as the perpetrators of the trauma Ehrhart experienced as a soldier in the Vietnam War.

Vietnam-Perkasie establishes a community of perpetrators for the trauma of the Vietnam much larger than a single entity; the perpetrators of trauma for the Vietnam War included all those who did not directly participate within it – which included the Weather Underground. Deceived not by his participation in the war, but the unexpected transformation within the community that urged his enlistment, Ehrhart arrives on U.S. soil anticipating the same world he departed. Instead, Ehrhart was confronted by a population expecting him, as a soldier in Vietnam, to atone for the horrors of the war in entirety. Characterizing the perpetrators of trauma as a conglomerate that sprouted suddenly, Ehrhart determines that “like the whole antiwar movement, the hippies and flower people seemed to have materialized out of nowhere during my absence from The World” (Ehrhart 275). This new breed of American directly countered the

world Ehrhart imagined during his time in Vietnam, their existence making his imaginary haven, a place to find reprieve from war, into something much different. The realization that the community that had shipped soldiers off to war was no longer interested in commending those same individuals upon their return prompted an outburst from Ehrhart, one that neatly conveys the consternation of the narrator: “what the hell do these fuckin' people know anyway?” I thought, addressing myself to the hippies in particular and to everyone else in general. ‘What right do they have?’” (Ehrhart 275). As a soldier and citizen, Ehrhart had performed his duties – ones imposed on him by the same society that now shirked responsibility for those actions. *Vietnam-Perkasie* interacts with a brand of trauma that imposes guilt not on the soldier, but on the society that transformed and left its soldiers without a foundation. *Vietnam-Perkasie* establishes survivors and perpetrators of trauma as two entities that can find no cohesion with one another, no middle ground, leading to a relationship between the two that is eternally conflicting.

Vietnam-Perkasie establishes a relationship between survivors and perpetrators of trauma that is far more dramatic than any other literature included in this compilation. The emergence of a new kind of American soldier, one that was engaged in domestic war, catapulted Ehrhart into a liminal state: unable to return home and incapable of continuing to imagine an alternate reality. This complex structure made it impossible for cohesion between the two communities, neither able to recognize the merit of the other. Ehrhart documents his consternation by comparing life alongside this community of perpetrators as an experience akin to Vietnam: “thirteen fuckin' months, all I did was dream about getting' back to The World. So I finally get here, and everything's bass-ackwards every which way to Tuesday. It's worse than Nam – I can't even put up a short time calendar” (Ehrhart 299). The perceptions of war Ehrhart clings to within *Vietnam-Perkasie* are individual myths; ones the author determines a larger community fostered

and subsequently abandoned. In a discussion on the trauma of veterans, Tal states that “individual soldiers reacted to this shock not with the self-condemnation and resignation of the victim, nor with the anger of the oppressed, but with a deep sense of betrayal. This was not the way it was supposed to be” (Tal 140). This observation explains the stark divide *Vietnam-Perkasie* establishes between the community of perpetrators and the community of survivors within the Vietnam War. Informed by a community that advocated for war, Ehrhart returns as a veteran aching for recognition and, instead, confronts a world where veterans of Vietnam are not revered as heroes, but interpreted with disdain. Unlike O'Brien, Ehrhart does not see a connection between his role as soldier and his responsibility as perpetrator of the trauma of the Vietnam War. Instead, *Vietnam-Perkasie* presents a chronicle of the trauma of the Vietnam War that relies on separation of perpetrators and survivors of trauma, because the trauma that defined Ehrhart's experience was one of isolation.

Ehrhart's participation in the Vietnam War shattered his framework for understanding the world, both inside and outside of Vietnam. *Vietnam-Perkasie* is a piece of trauma literature that presents a traumatic experience as narrative, a linear recounting of the memory of trauma held by the author. Untainted by a belated understanding of the event, *Vietnam-Perkasie* examines the trauma of the Vietnam War as one that did not just manifest in physical struggles and moral conflicts, but underlined the foundation of identity for its soldiers. Ehrhart's text is exemplary of Tal's determination that trauma literature “desires that the readers live, rather than re-live, the experience...and that they will sustain some of the same damage to their belief system as he did in the war” (Tal 101). The preserved memory of the trauma of Vietnam, *Vietnam-Perkasie* bears witness to the experience of its author but, more pertinently, it provides access for its readers. Although no reader can ever fully ascertain the trauma of the Vietnam War, *Vietnam-Perkasie* illustrates the experience of a soldier in the Vietnam War through the recitation of memory,

altered only for the sake of cohesiveness.

Revisiting the Weather Underground

"Revisiting the Weather Underground" is a short essay within *Sing a Battle Song*, compilation of essays, poetry, and written works by the Weather Underground Organization. Ayers' text is a continuation of *Prairie Fire*, interacting with the trauma of the Vietnam War as one that does not dissipate, but expands as history progresses; the intriguing component of Ayers' text relying on his reemphasis of the importance of processing history, Vergangenheitsbewältigung, but his inability to come to terms with his own history in the larger trauma of Vietnam. Ayers writes "Revisiting the Weather Underground" to document "the wretched years of the American war in Vietnam, the dark decade of serial assassinations of black leaders, the exhilarating upheaval, and the sparkling fight for freedom and peace and justice and revolution as I'd experienced it" (Ayers 28). Ayers' conception of his role within this larger and ongoing trauma has not altered since the conclusion of the Weather Underground Organization. "Revisiting the Weather Underground" incorporates Tal's tenets of trauma literature, but modifies them. Ayers, viewing the trauma of the Vietnam War as a present and pressing reality, establishes a community of survivors and perpetrators of trauma, but notes that the relationship between the two is ever-changing. Filled with the same hyperbolic rhetoric found in earlier constructions of Weather literature, Ayers' text makes no concessions for the faults of the WUO and points, instead, only to the increasing ignorance of current generations as the trauma of the Vietnam War amplifies with the passage of time. "Revisiting the Weather Underground" is a construction of trauma literature that can only be truly understood in relationship to the text that preceded, *Prairie Fire*. Framing trauma as a contemporary reality, Ayers' the text has an agenda: to awaken multiple generations, composed of those who witnessed and those who learned an inadequate history of the Vietnam War, to their role in perpetuating the trauma of that war.

Determining a community of trauma survivors within "Revisiting the Weather Underground" is a legitimate challenge because of its interpretation of trauma as a current struggle; the text feeds heavily into the interpretation of survivors of trauma first encountered in *Prairie Fire*: there are none. Instead, "Revisiting the Weather Underground" is a text that seeks to convey the ongoing positions of all Americans as continued victims, perpetrators, and witnesses of a trauma highlighted, but not confined to the Vietnam War. Ayers writes only as a survivor of an underground and unacknowledged war, writing to explain the trauma of "living through the time, the aggression, the assassinations, the terrorist war raging on and on in our names, it seemed as if we were experiencing terminally cataclysmic events and permanent war" (Ayers 24). This depiction of an eternal trauma, although acknowledged by the author as somewhat hyperbolic, reflects the intensity with which the Weather Underground was compelled to act. Cognizant of the importance of his actions, Ayers determines his role within the Vietnam War as one defined by action, labeling his role "immodestly as a freedom fighter, but I knew that 'terrorist' was tattooed over every inch of me – it was an electrifying label, even then" (28). The label defined Ayers' experience, fit the imperative of action that intensified as "the war became deadlier and deadlier – each day that it dragged on, two thousand innocent people were murdered by the United States government. Not every week or every month – every day. Two thousand people. Slaughtered. And there was no end in sight" (Ayers 23-4). Determining when extremism is justified is not one confined to the Vietnam War, "Revisiting the Weather Underground" outlines the continued impact of trauma by outlining the recurrent need for the application of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* as the community of perpetrators has increased exponentially as the Vietnam War becomes a mere memory.

"Revisiting the Weather Underground" defines a community of perpetrators for the trauma of the Vietnam War, symbiotic with the intended audience of the texts: namely, everyone.

The continued dismissal of the true history of the Vietnam War, one in which Ayers' experience as a Weatherman comprises a minute fraction, ensures that “whole generations might grow up, get old, and die and never lift a hand against one another, and yet the relationship, adequately examined and understood – yes, observed from the start – was violent at its very core” (Ayers 32). The communities of perpetrators for the trauma of the Vietnam War increases as time presses on, as new generations absorb a history of the Vietnam War that perpetuates the myth constructed around it. This conception of trauma fits in with Tal's determination that “that the war lives on...and that it may be passed on to his children, and down through the generations” (Tal 111). "Revisiting the Weather Underground," written as both memoir and a new chapter of *Weather* manifesto, relies heavily on this notion that trauma is transmittable through generations – and that the perpetrators of trauma in Vietnam are all those who complacently absorb a version of the war as it is presented in “the imagined sixties area bounded myth, constantly being retold, constantly being repackaged and retold as a containable cultural unit” (Ayers 32). Instead, "Revisiting the Weather Underground" portrays a relationship between Ayers, as a veteran of the WUO, and this community of perpetrators.

Application of Tal's final tenet to "Revisiting the Weather Underground" requires acknowledging, again, the unification of survivors and perpetrators in the complicated trauma of the Vietnam War; Ayers, however, establishes a relationship between the perpetrators of Vietnam and himself that mirrors the bond between parent and petulant child. Ayers does not construe his experience with the trauma of the Vietnam War, contemporary or otherwise, as one that he can claim to be a survivor of – at least not entirely. Revisiting his experiences as a member of the Weather Underground, Ayers speaks with the authority of an individual who witnessed the trauma of the Vietnam War, as someone who was there and who acted. The development of perpetrators of trauma, primarily those in his own generation, who complacently witnessed the

Vietnam War but who now lay claim to action, “people now in their fifties or sixties risk settling for a gutted version of the past – we all opposed the war, we now say, we all fought for civil rights,” contribute to the neat construction of the Vietnam War as a conflict to which all who were present opposed (Ayers 33). Ayers, as a Weather member, legitimately acted, well aware that his experience would counter the narrative of the war, but recognizing that “stepping into history, we would make errors; staying aloof from history would be its own choice and error” (Ayers 27). "Revisiting the Weather Underground" chastises the absorption of the narrative of the Vietnam War constructed by those who truly only witnessed its progression, reinforcing the legitimacy of the Weather Underground.

"Revisiting the Weather Underground" approaches the trauma of the Vietnam War not as a distant memory, but a present reality. The text fulfills each of Tal's tenets, but does so by altering their application to a trauma that is ongoing and accessible through the construction of literature. Contesting the notion that the struggle of Weather members had ended, Ayers determines that this mentality extinguishes the fervor to interact with the larger, pervasive trauma that defined the Vietnam War. Instead, "Revisiting the Weather Underground" directly questions what the memoirs of Rudd, Ehrhart, and O'Brien all sought to do: “How do we tell the world about this war?” (Ayers 41). The course and purpose of Ayers' text differs vastly from the other pieces of Vietnam War literature. Ayers engages with the trauma of the Vietnam War as a persistent and festering wound, rather than a scar that crystallizes in history on the history. Ayers, then, uses "Revisiting the Weather Underground" as a platform to preach the need for a process of reexamining the Vietnam War, but does so without embarking on the undertaking himself. Luckhurst determines a variation of trauma literature that coincides with the construction of Ayers' essay, noting that “a testimony wants to situate a personal trauma as a representative experience, perhaps of an oppressed group, then this extension from individual to representation

extremity will frequently ‘draw skepticism more readily than sympathy’” (Luckhurst 137). Ayers does not revisit his personal experience as a member of the WUO, instead "Revisiting the Weather Underground" chronicles the experience of the organization as an oppressed, ignored voice within the history of the Vietnam War.

Comparison

The parallels between “Revisiting the Weather Underground” and *Vietnam-Perkasie* are not readily apparent, but “Revisiting the Weather Underground” is an unexpected piece of WUO literature. Ayers is able to explicate the necessity and even convey sincerity when speaking of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, but his narrative presents no understanding that he himself has must re-imagine his participation in the Vietnam War in a new way. The same commentary underlines *Vietnam-Perkasie*. Ehrhart was undeniably traumatized by his interaction within the war, from the physical ailments of war to the shattering of an ideological framework of comprehension. *Vietnam-Perkasie* documents the individual trauma of war, but is the sole text to simply present, and not interact, with a traumatic experience. This text does not debunk conventional notions of trauma literature; Ehrhart still bears witness to the trauma he experienced as a soldier in Vietnam, but never extends the conversation beyond that point. The intriguing part of Ayers' text, and the aspect that situates his construction on the same pole as Ehrhart, is the ability of the author to engage with the trauma he experienced, the recognition of the larger cultural trauma of the Vietnam outlines the intricacies of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, extrapolates on its necessity and then completely ostracizes his own experience as Weather member from requiring that same interaction. In both constructions of literature the narrator (or author) conveys an experience that incited an alteration in what both men conceived the experience of war to truly be, feeding into Tal's notion that a “grand revision of a personal myth must always spring from a traumatic experience” (Tal 225). Both texts convey the transformative competent of the experience their

authors underwent as participants in the Vietnam War and the war to explain the Vietnam War, outlining the trauma they experienced for a larger conglomeration. These texts counter the constructions of O'Brien and Rudd because of their comprehension that the Vietnam War, while transformative as a traumatic experience, requires no revision of the experience for the authors of literature.

V. If I Die In a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home and Underground

If I Die and *Vietnam-Perkasie* are two unique accounts of the Vietnam War from authors who served in various sectors of the U.S. military, each conveying fundamentally different perceptions of their status as survivors of trauma. Tinged with “a reiterative institutional amnesia,” a term crafted by Luckhurst to explain the necessity of soldiers to revisit their actions outside of a military framework, O'Brien and Ehrhart reconstruct their experience(s) as combat veterans of Vietnam (Luckhurst 51). Two texts that, by their book jackets, appear identical, determine separate perceptions of the community of survivors, community of perpetrators, and the relationship between survivors and perpetrators created by the Vietnam War. O'Brien grapples with the trauma of life in a war zone, documenting an inability to differentiate between his role as soldier and his position as witness. Recognizing his position as a victim and survivor of trauma only after the conclusion of the war, O'Brien's ~~text~~ relies heavily on a lapse of time between the traumatic event and his narration of it. Ehrhart unpacks his experience in Vietnam as one defined immediately by his role as a victim of trauma. *Vietnam-Perkasie*, written in first-person narration, recounts Ehrhart's experience in Vietnam as real time event and engages with the trauma that stemmed from those actions without additional explication, even as an author writing after his experience in Vietnam had lapsed. Each text counters the myth of the American soldier as an unabashed hero of war. *If I Die* and *Vietnam-Perkasie* display “the multifaceted suffering of veterans,” who emerged from the Vietnam War and chronicled their traumatic

experiences through a medium that would allow for fallibility and inconsistency (Varon 195).

Written in the hopes of unveiling to readers the reality of the Vietnam War, *If I Die* and *Vietnam-Perkasie* are distinct accounts of trauma that, when unified, construct an understanding of the Vietnam War as a wholly traumatic event for all those involved – a reality that could only truly be explicated after the conclusion of the war.

If I Die

If I Die interacts with the trauma of the Vietnam War from the perspective of a soldier confined in a paradoxical position as both witness and instigator of trauma. Splattered between accounts of gruesome violence is a chronicle of the trauma of the Vietnam War by an intensely conflicted author. O'Brien elucidates on the trauma of war from the standpoint of a soldier embroiled within it, transplanted into the war not by a personal sense of conviction and unable to reconcile a dual role as both victim and perpetrator of trauma. *If I Die* carries its readers through a war without end, with a narrator unmotivated by the anticipation of returning to his former life. Written to edify a larger populace to the horrors of Vietnam, in the author's own words, *If I Die* is “a plea for everlasting peace, a plea from one who knows, from one who's been there and come back, an old soldier looking back at a dying war” (O'Brien 23). Anticipating the absorption of his text by an audience ignorant to the experience of combat, O'Brien routinely reminds readers that *If I Die* followed the conclusion of the Vietnam War. A tactic that prevents the reader from fully engaging with the narrative, the repetition of the distinction between past and present is, however, essential to O'Brien's depiction of trauma. *If I Die* is a crucial text for examining the trauma of the Vietnam War because it unabashedly argues that the experience of a soldier in the war was traumatic; simultaneously, however, O'Brien emphasizes that the experience of soldiers in Vietnam was, initially, undefined. O'Brien paints a harsh portrait of the Vietnam War as an avoidable trauma perpetuated by the entity that served to most profit from its continuation: the

military. Blending Tal's tenets of trauma, O'Brien unveils the complex responsibility of a soldier in war as both instigator and survivor, positioned in an environment that reinforces the notion that a soldier can only enact, and not encounter, trauma.

Implementing the first of Tal's markers of trauma, *If I Die* establishes a community of trauma survivors composed of soldiers actively engaged in combat in the Vietnam War. Aware of the devastation that they were inflicting, but unable to hinder the course of that destruction, the soldiers of *If I Die* are isolated in combat, stripped of individual identity, and dehumanized by their environment. O'Brien characterizes life in Vietnam as akin to "waking up in a cancer ward, no one ambitious to get on with the day, no obligations, no plans, nothing to hope for, no dreams for the daylight" (O'Brien 9). The comparison between soldier and invalid, the first portrait of Vietnam that O'Brien presents to his readers, is an unexpected one. An image of soldiers that are not strong, but more similar to an individual weakened by an internally waged war, O'Brien establishes a community of trauma survivors not conventionally regarded as victims of war. Externally, the soldiers of Vietnam are indistinguishable, a uniform body devoid of idiosyncrasy. Internally, however, O'Brien's soldiers grapple with an inaudible struggle – one that manifests uniquely in every individual. The anomaly that arises is that soldiers are allowed reprieve from neither the external nor internal trials of war, as there is "a certainty of going to war: pending doom that comes in with each day's light and lingers all day long" (O'Brien 51). O'Brien's iteration of this seemingly ubiquitous trauma felt by soldiers in the throes of combat is a disturbing facet of the text, one that ties into the reconstruction of a "traumatic suffering [that] was seemingly without purpose, arbitrary" (Tal 121).

Defined by an internal conflict less visible, but equally vile as the one being waged in the combat zones of Vietnam, the soldiers of *If I Die* are, ultimately, sympathetic characters; young men who, through a series of events, realized "here we are. Mama has been kissed good-bye,

we've grabbed our rifles, we're ready for war. All this not because of conviction, not for ideology” (O'Brien 38). Adorned with the costume of combatants and planted in the focal point of conflict, the soldiers of *If I Die* were not equipped with the ideological scruples necessary for war, a disconcerting reality only fully recognized after the conclusion of the war, when the veterans of Vietnam began to assimilate into the world, O'Brien reconstructs his experience in Vietnam with a newfound understanding of it as a conscious decision made by the community of trauma perpetrators within *If I Die*.

Survivors of trauma in O'Brien's text are unified by their status as soldiers who directly absorb and implement orders from a larger source; the community of perpetrators in *If I Die* is not those who witnessed the trauma of Vietnam passively, but those that oversaw it: the upper echelons of the military. O'Brien reflects on the trauma of the Vietnam War as a remorseful participant within it, illustrating himself and his fellow soldiers as uninformed victims of the true nature of the conflict in Vietnam. The determination to involve young men, driven by mandate and not conviction, into the chaos of Vietnam was the conscious decision of a larger conglomeration. This realization is one that inspires the latter part of *If I Die*, where O'Brien explicitly states his intention at the end of the war: “I would write about the army. Expose the brutality and injustice and stupidity and arrogance of wars and men who fight in them...I would expose the carelessness” (O'Brien 93). Bearing witness to the subjugation of soldiers by the same structure that created them, O'Brien is unsympathetic in his caricature of this community of perpetrators.

Numerous instances within *If I Die* convey the intense repression imposed on soldiers in Vietnam, but the comments of the army chaplain clearly encapsulate this portrait of military superiors as perpetrators of trauma. Interjecting into a discussion on the validity of the Vietnam War, the chaplain responds with an outburst declaring, “goddamnit, you're a soldier now, and

you'll sure as hell act like one...If you accept, as I do, that America is one hulluva great country, well, then, you follow what she tells you. She says fight, then you go out and do your damndest. You try to win" (O'Brien 58-9). An eruption expected from a sergeant or even a fellow soldier, its utterance by an individual meant to serve as a resource for soldiers is jarring; precisely the point of its inclusion. The military framework of the Vietnam War forced ultimate uniformity and discouraged contemplation of validity and morality, for "simply to think and talk and try to understand was evidence that we were not cattle or machines" (O'Brien 35). These individuals, groomed for combat, were indoctrinated into a war where "the front line was a mechanized factory of death," the soldier simply filing through (Luckhurst 50). *If I Die*, unlike most other veteran memoirs, is able to examine the repression of the military system on soldiers attempting to comprehend their environments; the reliance of soldiers on this same system creates a confounding relationship between perpetrators and survivors of trauma.

The relationship between the community of perpetrators and the survivors of trauma in *If I Die* is paradoxical. Soldiers in O'Brien's Vietnam possessed both apathy and adoration for the structure that birthed them, simultaneously defined and divided by their position as actors in Vietnam. O'Brien defines the complicated relationship between soldiers and the military system they function within, by determining that "the war and my person seemed like twins as I went around the town's lake. Twins grafted together and forever together, as if a separation would kill them both" (O'Brien 20). With a recognition that evades many other texts documenting the trauma of Vietnam, O'Brien acknowledges the tightrope he unconsciously teetered on as a soldier in Vietnam. This grafting of self and service establishes soldiers in Vietnam as a mesh of survivor and perpetrator of trauma, acting not by their own conviction yet nevertheless inflicting trauma; O'Brien is immobilized by his position as a soldier. This fits with a challenge of trauma literature outlined by Tal, that "the soldier who remembered correctly would have been forced to

acknowledge his role as a victim of a government and social order that exploited him” (Tal 119). A realization that prompted O'Brien's narrative, the dual position of O'Brien as both perpetrator and survivor of trauma in Vietnam reinforces the possibility of melding within Tal's conceptions of trauma. O'Brien's position as a survivor of trauma is indiscernible from the community that perpetrated his traumatic experience is a conundrum, one that makes *If I Die* such an intriguing piece of trauma literature.

Indefinable as victims of trauma when isolated in the bureaucracy of a war zone, soldiers of O'Brien's Vietnam can only recall their experience as trauma survivors after returning to civilian life. Responding, indirectly, to Luckhurst's notion of transmittable trauma and the larger question that defines the bulk of trauma literature; O'Brien ponders “Can the foot soldier teach anything important about war, merely for having been there? I think not. He can tell war stories” (O'Brien 23). A fleeting statement within *If I Die*, this declaration defines the perception O'Brien holds that “the horrific events that have reshaped the author's construction of reality can only be described in literature, not recreated” (Tal 121). By revisiting his period as a soldier in the Vietnam War, O'Brien does not attempt to recreate the traumatic experience firsthand. Establishing himself and his fellow soldiers as a conglomerate of confused individuals, O'Brien regurgitates the horrors of the Vietnam War he simultaneously witnessed, condoned, and questioned. Unveiling a rarely seen depiction of soldiers in Vietnam as individuals stuck in a quagmire, constantly bombarded by accusations of ineptitude in their position as soldiers, *If I Die* is a piece of trauma literature that engages with trauma as an incident that can only be recounted because of its magnitude. O'Brien points to a larger cultural construction that perpetuated his individual experience with the trauma of the Vietnam War, critically engages with it, and presents it as a text meant to propagate some new understanding. Rudd's text, *Underground*, attempts to do the same, but with a much grander call for change.

Underground

In a decidedly distinct way, *Underground* mirrors *If I Die*. Although an odd memoir, less of a narrative and more of an analytical account of the trauma of the Vietnam War as experienced, Rudd writes as an author utterly removed from the mentality that inspired and condoned his actions. Approaching his experience as a Weather member through the lens of both survivor and critic, Rudd interacts with the trauma of the Vietnam War as he understood it at the time, but is wary of inciting admiration for his actions in response to that trauma. *Underground* presents as a linear account of Rudd's experience as a Weather member, charting his transformation from ardent revolution to the apologetic author; the text, however, is utterly digressive, the author taking time to explain particular events to ensure no misconceptions transfer to his readers. Though Rudd is not wholly critical of his participation within the WUO, *Underground* constructs an image of the Weather Underground Organization as an entity that demanded conformity and unquestioned militancy. As a Weather member, Rudd engaged in a violent domestic war against the Vietnam War and did so under the presumption that he possessed a complete understanding of the event. *Underground* revisits this flawed understanding, depicting one of the most concrete interactions with *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* that is present in any Weather literature. *Underground* underscores what James Wilson determines to be the purpose of trauma literature: “we read Vietnam War literature in order to learn what not to do next time” (Tal 64). Applying Tal's tenets of trauma to *Underground* establishes Rudd's experience within the WUO as one similar to those of O'Brien and Ehrhart within the military. Dissecting the trauma of Vietnam War as the catalyst for the construction of the WUO, the text attests to the mentality documented in *Prairie Fire*: that all Americans were simultaneously perpetrators and survivors of a larger historical trauma, a mandate that makes the process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* a collective responsibility.

The text pushes Tal's identifiers a step further by claiming that Rudd's experiences as a Weather member also established the author as a veteran of the domestic war sparked by the trauma of Vietnam War. The fundamental component of *Underground* is its depiction of Vergangenheitsbewältigung: Rudd is revisiting his time as a Weather member and reexamining, reflecting, and reforming his understanding of trauma for a new generation, one that must continue or initiate this larger undertaking of seeking to understand the Vietnam War.

Underground models the process of Vergangenheitsbewältigung, as Rudd reflects on his own participation within a traumatic event, outside of the shackles of the WUO; the text conveys the understanding that Vergangenheitsbewältigung is a continuous methodology for comprehending trauma. If “a significant aspect of trauma theory is the recurrence of memories or the repetition of catastrophic acts,” Rudd's text exemplifies that reality by reexamining his experience as a Weather member, but articulating, in a different context, the same mandate for interaction with the Vietnam War that was vocalized by the WUO in *Prairie Fire* (Williamson 748). Even in Rudd's characterizations of Tal's tenets, *Underground* constantly reinforces the reality that the memories of the WU, and the war to explain the war, are being reconstructed and reinterpreted after the conclusion of the Vietnam War.

Underground implements Tal's notion of a community of trauma survivors by depicting the consternation of former Weather members who, upon reevaluating their experience and engagement during the Vietnam War, realize their actions were ineffective. Rudd realized, too late, in his experience as a Weatherman that his personal convictions did not directly mesh with the actions of the WUO. *Underground* notes that the existence of the Weather Underground is complex, particularly for outsiders, but Rudd determines “if you fail to see that we are the victims – defendants of genocidal war – you will not understand the rage of the blacks, the fierceness of the browns, the holy fanaticism of the Palestinians, the righteous mania of the

Weathermen, and the pervasive resentment of the young” (Rudd 229). This statement defines the struggle of the WUO as one of warfare, but Rudd ensures that his own experience as a Weather member is obvious as an experience of trauma. Rudd determines that, after the conclusion of the Vietnam War, he was left “to deal with my own form of post-traumatic stress disorder,” returning to a world that was unchanged by his actions, but one that had defined him as a terrorist, a fugitive, and a failure (Rudd 310). Shrinking back into the shadows of the society he sought to unravel, Rudd's is a dismal account of life as a Weather member. It is an account of the trauma of the Vietnam War that bears witness, but also deters the possibility of its repetition. Rudd writes, just before the conclusion of *Underground*, “[I] offer my own disastrous experience with violence in Weatherman and the Weather Underground, explaining how it didn't work and why it can never work in this country” (Rudd 312). *Underground* presents an unconventional, incredibly specific community of survivors intertwined within a larger community of not one, but two perpetrators of trauma in the Vietnam War.

In establishing a community of perpetrators of trauma, *Underground* addresses two intertwined populations: one already heavily documented in *Prairie Fire* and one unique to Rudd's text. Rudd reflects that the general stance of the WUO was that “there were no innocent Americans, at least no white ones. They – we – all played some part in the atrocity of Vietnam, if only the passive roles of ignorance, acquiescence, and acceptance of privilege. Universally guilty, all Americans were legitimate targets for attack” (Rudd 194). This characterization fits with the ideology of *Prairie Fire* but does not acknowledge a separate and, for Rudd, more explicit perpetrator of the trauma he experienced. Rudd determines the WUO to be its own brand of perpetrator - an organization that refused to question its inconsistencies and abandoned its members. This directly parallels the characterization of the military in O'Brien's text, a reality that historian Jeremy Varon extrapolates on by determining that Weather members display a

“real historical contradiction' in their dual identities as both 'oppressors and oppressed” (Varon 156). *Underground* further unpacks this determination. A conglomerate of revolutionaries that believed its foundation addressed the dual identity of its members; the WUO reacted harshly to declarations of doubt regarding its role or actions. As Weathermen scattered underground, this harsh mandate of conformity became more complex and harrowing to an extent that Weather members either were in agreement, or had abandoned revolution. This tightrope, between Weather member or enemy, caused even Rudd to question his own conviction, noting that “I felt trapped in the organization, always worried I would say the wrong thing, fearful that I'd expose myself as not being revolutionary enough or now, with the new line, not hip enough” (Rudd 223). This declaration echoes the isolation depicted in Ehrhart and O'Brien's memoirs, but is modified because, for Rudd, his experience as a Weather member was voluntary, made out of the desire to react to the trauma of the Vietnam War. *Underground* creates a complex relationship between the community of survivors and the community of perpetrators.

Tal's calling for a relationship between the community of perpetrators and the community of survivors garners a convoluted response in *Underground*. Rudd establishes both himself and his Weather peers as equally deserving of designations as both survivors and perpetrators, but pinpoints the WUO as the primary perpetrator of the trauma he experienced. This determination came only after Rudd was “haunted by memories from the years underground, especially old hurts, resentments, guilt. Only after the separation did I realize that I had needed to break with the past, escape the catastrophe of the Weather years, and go on to an entirely new life” (Rudd 302). As a member of the WUO, Rudd recognized the trauma of the War as one inflicted by and on a larger community, but refrained from establishing himself as a survivor of trauma until the dissolution of the Weathermen. Rudd never abandons the conception of trauma adopted by most Weather members, one that implicates its members as dually perpetrators and victims of a larger

cultural or historical trauma, but *Underground* examines the experience of being a member of the Weather Underground as a traumatic experience unto itself, a realization that could only occur after extended detachment from the traumatic event. Rudd acknowledges that the biggest regret of his experience as a member of the Weather Underground is that the trauma he witnessed, challenged, and internalized “didn't seem to affect anybody at all, in any way. We were not a part of most people's universe” (256). This realization prompts Rudd's application of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, seeking to clarify the process that the WU attempted to begin in *Prairie Fire*. *Underground* conveys to readers the experience of being a member of the Weather Underground and a witness to the Vietnam War, unveiling an interaction with trauma that, if acknowledged, would radically redefine the conception of the war.

Underground is not a simple text to examine, and Rudd does not intend it to be easily consumable. Charting Rudd's experiences and emotions as a Weather member, the text extends far beyond mere documentation of a singular experience. *Underground* posits to its readers a quandary that Tal notes is one of the primary questions of trauma literature: “how do we know what we know about the Vietnam War?” (Tal 147). A text that is riddled with guilt, not only for the existence of the Vietnam War, but the steps that were taken to alter its course, Rudd explains his motivation for relaying his experience in the following statement: “I continue to write and speak on the history of the Vietnam antiwar movement; my message is that we once actually did build a movement that helped stop another war of aggression – and that such a thing could happen again” (Rudd 311). Although highly critical of the WUO, Rudd maintains that its existence, and his experience within it, responded to the Vietnam War, from its politics to its trauma, in a unique way. Rudd, in a phrase easily ignorable for its simplicity, notes “we were kids then and grandparents now” (315). This distinction, although brief, acknowledges the transformation that allowed Rudd to recreate his experience as a Weather member. Attesting to

the misguided manner in which the WUO approached and perpetuated the trauma of the Vietnam War, Rudd depicts his existence as a survivor of trauma in the hopes of generating a radical cultural shift.

The creation of *Underground* poses to its audience the question of whether the history of the Vietnam War is contained entirely in the treacherous combat zones of Vietnam, or whether its trauma extended far beyond the parameters of a battle zone and into a larger cycle of history. Written just before the commencement of both the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, Rudd is writing with a distinctive purpose. Rudd writes that “the violence of the era – in Vietnam and on the streets of this country – and the tragic consequences have to be looked at clearly and rationally. We need a truth and reconciliation process, such as happened in South Africa, to finally put an end to the suffering” (Rudd 309). Although not engaging with the vernacular, Rudd outlines the primary intention of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*: a cultural shift that will alter the way that the Vietnam War is remembered.

Comparison

If I Die and *Underground* are examples of similar undertakings: through literature, O'Brien and Rudd attempt to bear witness to a traumatic event by critically engaging with their existence during the Vietnam War through narratives that critically interact with the experience of their authors. The disparities that emerge between the two rely on the distinction between individual and cultural trauma. O'Brien, in his memoir, is illuminating the individual trauma he experienced as someone engaged in combat, elucidating on a very different form of trauma than Rudd interacts with in his text. Rudd engages with his experience as a Weather member with the awareness of someone who is reconfiguring the veracity of a personal history, *Underground* outlines the process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* that still, decades removed from the realities of Vietnam, has the potential of occurring on a far grander scale. Each of these texts challenge

the perception of the Vietnam War, and the separate traumas their authors experienced, in opposition to the experiences of Ayers and Ehrhart.

VII. Final Analysis (ses)

If I Die, *Vietnam-Perkasie*, *Prairie Fire*, *Underground* and “Revisiting the Weather Underground” are five texts created to explain a history of the Vietnam War that is unknown to the vast majority of Americans. As veteran memoirs, *If I Die* and *Vietnam-Perkasie* are examinations of the trauma of the Vietnam War by individuals who possess the authority, because of their physical presence in the combat zones of Vietnam, to challenge alternate narratives surrounding the event. Ehrhart and O'Brien construct two separate and, at times, oppositional portraits of the experience of a soldier in Vietnam; each text fits within the confines of trauma literature despite the discrepancies between the literary construction and content of the texts. *Prairie Fire*, *Underground*, and “Revisiting the Weather Underground” provide three separate conceptions of trauma, each of which inform one another. As the only text written during the Vietnam War, *Prairie Fire* preserves the ideology of the WUO in its own words, without the embellishment or embarrassment present in the later literature of Weather members. An understanding of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* helps to unfurl the complex cultural trauma outlined in *Prairie Fire*, and later in the memoirs of Rudd and Ayers. *Underground* and “Revisiting the Weather Underground” exhibit similarities to the memoirs of Ehrhart and O'Brien, each text chronicling an idiosyncratic experience as members of the Weather Underground. These five texts determine an equal number of variations in the depictions of trauma within them; each text contains Tal's tenets of trauma literature, extends Luckhurst's notion of transmittable trauma, and – for the literature of the WUO – introduces *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* into a conversation on the trauma of the Vietnam War.

Each of these five texts attempts to do precisely what Tal decrees is the point of trauma

literature: *If I Die*, *Vietnam-Perkasie*, *Prairie Fire*, *Underground* and “Revisiting the Weather Underground,” all bear witness to the Vietnam War in the hopes of instilling a comprehension of the Vietnam War that challenges even the possibility of constructing a cookie-cutter narrative of the war. Despite the discrepancies that emerge between the texts when viewed comparatively, these five pieces of literature document the experience of individuals who did *something* in response to the Vietnam War; a feat that, in hindsight, may seem inconsequential, but for the authors of these five texts was momentous. Differing in their determination of the survivors and perpetrators of the trauma they experienced, the texts’ depiction of the relationship between those two communities, and their description of the trauma of the Vietnam War, unite to “help us reformulate a myth we can live with” regarding the Vietnam War (Tal 66). Where O'Brien and Ehrhart recount their experiences, leaving it to the reader to grapple with and absorb this new version of history; *Prairie Fire*, “Revisiting the Weather Underground,” and *Underground* create literature that documents trauma as a means of prompting interaction. The literature of the WUO documents a trauma that is historic, rooted in the past and persisting in the present, and these authors impart the challenge of reconstructing and reformulating the myth of the Vietnam War for their readers. Rudd and Ayers bear witness to their experiences, both as revolutionaries against the Vietnam War and fighters in a never-ending domestic war. Rudd and Ayers create literature to preserve the history of the organization they were a part of, to clarify their experience as unconventional soldiers within the war, but their texts advocate that the struggles of the past are not voided in the present.

The hesitancy of theorists to include the literature generated by the Weather Underground as literature of trauma is the “secondary status” of the authors as survivors of trauma. This concept, explained by Luckhurst, is a phenomenon that occurs when “victims and their listeners or viewers who are commonly moved to forms of overwhelming sympathy, even to the extent of claiming secondary victim” (Luckhurst 3). Neither Rudd nor Ayers experienced the trauma of the

Vietnam War directly; therefore affirmations of their literature as examples of trauma narratives routinely ignored, their depictions of the Vietnam War falling too drastically away from traditional accounts of the war. Both authors were, however, the primary victims of a unique warfare that was enacted in direct response to the Vietnam War. Though Ayers and Rudd squabble within their texts over their status as survivors of the “War to Explain the War,” each author crafts these works in “to create a new ‘consciousness of trauma’ in Western society,” (Luckhurst 59). This new awakening can take various forms; for the literature of the WUO the engagement with *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* points to the construction of a new narrative to comprehend the Vietnam War. The Vietnam War is still a contested space in U.S. History, “the process of public *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* has only just begun” (McCarthy 635). The literature of the WUO, however unconsciously, began the process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* and did so before there was an established narrative surrounding the Vietnam War. Though fervently dismissed by a variety of academic disciplines, the WUO understood the Vietnam War with a clarity that evaded an entire generation. The absence of the WUO in any discourse on the Vietnam War, but particularly in a dialogue on the trauma that stemmed from the event, is an oversight that limits the construction of an accurate, if not authentic national narrative for a historic event already defined by convulsion.

Through literature, members of the WUO sought and seek to clarify their experience for themselves and the extended community impacted or irked by their existence. Displaying an account of the Vietnam War that makes the trauma it experienced entirely inclusive, regardless of geographical, societal, political, or fiscal status, the literature of WUO illustrates an alternative portrait of Vietnam, as a war that generated a domestic conflict and a continuing struggle to incorporate the Vietnam War into a larger historical narrative. Trauma does not acknowledge geography, nor does it manifest only in those who have experienced combat or anticipated the return of those that do. Adopting similar styles and soliloquies to O’Brien and Ehrhart, the

literature of the WUO displays an intense yearning, on the part of a population heavily disconnected from the events in Vietnam, to respond to the trauma derived from it and to explicate to the population of the United States that they, too, were embroiled within it. Their texts, only smatterings of which are analyzed here, convey the magnitude of the trauma of the Vietnam War, a trauma which the WUO witnessed, combated, and recorded for future generations.

VIII. Conclusion

In two unique periods of history, members of Weather Underground Organization engaged with a trauma that was as pervasive as it was intrinsic to their identity as privileged white Americans. Although incredibly flawed, the literature generated by the WUO provides a definitive commentary on the challenge of processing the Vietnam War as a cultural, and now, historical trauma. Their literature approaches questions of how to witness and communicate a trauma that every privileged American profits from with tenacity that no other organization or entity has ever been able to capture or replicate. Fraught with undertones and declarations similar to those of veterans who are survivors of a very different form of trauma, the literature of the WUO are productions from Weather members who ardently believed they were survivors of an idiosyncratic form of warfare. When compared to the writings of veterans of the Vietnam War, the interjection of Weather voices into a discourse on the trauma of the Vietnam War presents a radically distinct depiction of the trauma spurred by the Vietnam War and a decisively unique comprehension of the power of literature to convey trauma.

The literature of the Weather Underground Organization is an anomaly, a unique construction of trauma from the perspective of an organization and its individual members who construed the Vietnam War as the culmination, but not the conclusion of a historical trauma.

Prairie Fire, Underground, and “Revisiting the Weather Underground” bear witness to a war at

home waged synonymously with the war in Vietnam, but contribute to a larger canon of trauma literature by engaging, for the first time, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* as a means of comprehending the trauma of the Vietnam War. The writings of the WUO attempt to engage a larger population in this process not once, but twice, displaying the failure to generate, even thirty years out of the war, an interaction with its true history. Outlining the ignorance that occurred both within the organization and outside of it, *Prairie Fire*, *Underground*, and “Revisiting the Weather Underground” are three texts that span a similar number of decades in their construction, ultimately reinforcing for the American populace the need to fully comprehend the Vietnam War, or risk forever replicating an oppressive and unfortunate cycle of history. The presence of the Weather Underground sought to fill a void that no one had determined needed to be occupied; their literature does the same. *Prairie Fire*, *Underground*, and “Revisiting the Weather Underground” interact with the trauma of the Vietnam War in a decidedly unique way: not as legitimate combatants, not as politicians, and not as individuals wholly proud of their participation within the war. Irrevocably altering standard narratives of the Vietnam War, these three texts seek to unveil, for those that both ridicule and revere the WUO, the complexity of remembering the Vietnam War and ardently argue for the capacity of literature to inspire a tremendous cultural reform not once, but twice. The literature of the Weather Underground interacts with the trauma of the Vietnam that dramatically alters discourse surrounding the war, radically redefining the ways in which trauma literature can catapult and compel action from its readers.

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