

GEOFFREY A. WRIGHT

Acknowledging Experience: *Pork Chop Hill* and the Geography of the Korean War

Studies of the Korean War ranging from the historical to the literary to the filmic have consistently emphasized the ramifications of the American public's peculiar reception of the conflict. Scholars have been preoccupied with the political dynamics that prevented the war from achieving the iconic status of World War II or the Vietnam War. This essay sets forth a geographic semiotics of Korean War combat narratives, investigating how books and films draw on an array of geographically coded signs to construct the meaning of the war at the microscopic level of frontline foot-soldiers rather than at the macroscopic level of international politics.¹ A geographic semiotics offers a new set of analytical tools for probing literary and filmic representations of the Korean War and a fresh means to acknowledge the cultural and aesthetic significance of the conflict. I focus on S.L.A. Marshall's nonfiction book *Pork Chop Hill* (1956), Lewis Milestone's film adaptation *Pork Chop Hill* (1959), and to a lesser extent Marshall's earlier nonfiction book *The River and the Gauntlet* (1952).² Combat narratives such as these lend themselves to the type of study I conduct here insofar as they are anchored to the physical structures and features of the battlefields on which the infantry fighting unfolds. A geographic semiotics illuminates the function of geography as a multivalent narrative agent and as the medium through which the combatants' physical struggles and psychological crises are imagined and communicated.³ This particular study entails an analysis of the spatial structure and topographic texture

of the battlefield, the representation of the landscape as a formidable antagonist in its own respect, the identification of the palpable landscape with an ephemeral human enemy, and the signification of the combat zone as a site of human, environmental, and mechanical devastation.

The claim that the Korean War was forgotten by the American public and therefore needs to be acknowledged retrospectively by scholars and historians is persistent.⁴ The longevity of this argument suggests the ongoing need for a critical means of recognizing the war's human costs. A geographic semiotics constitutes just such a means. It is a flexible method of textual studies which is specially suited to the analysis of texts that represent the dynamics of ground combat and the personal struggles of the subjects who endure it. It is necessary at this point to frame my analysis by surveying scholarship on the literature and film of the war. This survey demonstrates that the failure to acknowledge the experiences of combatants and the historical significance of the war has been—and remains—a central concern for scholars as well as writers and filmmakers, particularly S.L.A. Marshall and Lewis Milestone. Within that critical context, this essay performs the work of a geographic semiotics in advancing the project of recovering the Korean War in literature and film.

The forgetting of the Korean War is especially evident where film and literature on the war are concerned. Robin Andersen observes that the Korean War “barely registers in the collective catalogue of war stories and cultural references. It seems to sit in obscurity, forever occluded under the long shadow cast by the Good Fight.”⁵ While a significant number of memoirs, novels, poems, and films have been produced on the Korean War, the output is dwarfed by the representation of World War II or the Vietnam War in literature and film. W.D. Ehrhart relates, “There are, it turns out, a number of novels and memoirs to come out of the Korean War, some of them quite good, though none has earned the readership or durability of books like Norman Mailer’s *The Naked and the Dead* or Philip Caputo’s *A Rumor of War*.”⁶ Though Korean War-era writers have not attained the stature of World War II-era novelists such as Norman Mailer and James Jones or Vietnam War-era authors such as Philip Caputo or Tim O’Brien, they undoubtedly have made a significant contribution to the history of American war prose. W.D. Ehrhart and Philip K. Jason sought to rectify the public’s ignorance of the literature produced on the war by publishing an anthology of poetry and short fiction written by veterans.⁷ The project is as much a matter of social and critical commentary as it is a work of archival preservation: “With scant attention by anthologists and critics, it’s no wonder that the prevailing view is that few, if any, writers had their imaginations

sparked by the war in Korea. The prevailing view is wrong. If there is not a great wealth of literature from the Korean War, . . . there is nevertheless significant work in multiple genres worth retrieving, examining, and retaining.⁸ In a sense, their archival work *is* the commentary, at once a recognition and celebration of previously unheralded writers as well as a judgment on the readers who passed over them.

Concerns about the comparative lack of aesthetic output and the mostly cool reception of the material that was produced are keynotes of scholarship on Korean War literature and film. The problem of reception is especially evident in the film industry's handling of the war.⁹ Paul Edwards suggests that the "issues at stake in Korea were never clear. The people in Hollywood were as hard put as anyone to recognize the degree of American involvement, to understand the national goals, and identify who was the enemy."¹⁰ Like Edwards, David Scott Diffrient points to a lack of epistemological clarity as the primary problem. He suggests that the war offered "no readily identifiable heroes or just causes to fill the void for the moviegoing public of the Cold War generation."¹¹ Not surprisingly, considering the atmosphere of indifference surrounding the war, Korean War films vanished almost as quickly as they appeared. Charles Young explains that "there was never enough public protest over Korea to found a strong tradition of critical films," and he goes so far as to suggest that Korean War films "are more forgotten than the Forgotten War itself."¹² Philip Landon similarly remarks, "By the early 1970s, the cycle of Korean War films had run its course. . . . Korea was no longer the subject of American feature films. Hollywood had lost interest in a war that the American public had largely forgotten."¹³ After producing films on the war for roughly a decade, Hollywood jettisoned the war as an unmarketable subject.

Writers and filmmakers such as S.L.A. Marshall and Lewis Milestone demonstrate in their work a desire to memorialize the struggles and sacrifices of Americans who served in the Korean War.¹⁴ The film *Pork Chop Hill* concludes with a brief commentary on this issue in the form of a voiceover by Gregory Peck, who stars as the protagonist Lt. Joseph Clemons: "Pork Chop Hill was held—bought and paid for at the same price we commemorate in monuments at Bunker Hill and Gettysburg. Yet you will find no monuments on Pork Chop. Victory is a fragile thing, and history does not linger long in our century." Peck's statement condemns the common disregard for the suffering of American soldiers in the Korean War and confirms the status of the film itself as a celluloid monument substituting for one in stone on the National Mall.¹⁵ The film echoes the charge Marshall levels in his own historical account of Pork Chop Hill: "all that happened,

all of the heroism and all of the sacrifice, went unreported.”¹⁶ He goes on to claim that the battle “was won by the troops and lost to sight by the people who had sent them forth.”¹⁷ In light of his conviction that “some day their story should be told,” Marshall’s book takes shape as an eyewitness account of the battle and a much-needed acknowledgement, in the years immediately following the war, of American and United Nations soldiers doing the fighting.¹⁸ His work becomes much more than a matter of publishing recent events in Korea to the public back home. The “fundamental question,” according to Marshall, was “how the American character continues to meet the test of great events.”¹⁹ His determination to examine the worth and conduct of individual American soldiers occasionally overwhelms his allegiance to objective reportage. His narrative of the battle for Pork Chop is ideologically charged at times, particularly where questions of race and racial comparison are concerned. Yet, by anchoring the abstract question of “American character” in his sensory descriptions of the landscape and the soldiers’ encounters with it, he prevents his representation of the fighting from being lost in the political haze surrounding the war.

The book *Pork Chop Hill* echoes Marshall’s earlier historical study *The River and the Gauntlet*, which chronicles the defeat of American and South Korean forces in 1950 by the Chinese and North Koreans: “It is nonetheless a pity that young Americans have to die bravely but inconspicuously on a foreign hillside in a national cause and have no better words than these spoken of them.”²⁰ Throughout the book, Marshall is critical of the shortsightedness and overconfidence exhibited by American military leaders, including Gen. Douglas MacArthur. He even occasionally chides American infantrymen for their apparent lack of fighting skill or lapses in will power. Yet, he ends the book on a celebratory note, asserting that the American military’s “swift flight upward from its own ashes, even more than this story of struggle, bespeaks the character, courage, and faith of those who survived and the others still missing.”²¹ This concluding statement serves as a framing device signaling a patriotic impulse to memorialize the soldiers who fought and sacrificed as well as to affirm the integrity of the nation they represent.²² Marshall is ultimately drawn to the figure of the infantryman, fighting singly or in platoons and companies, and he seeks to eulogize those “individual Americans [who] met the crisis with their accustomed fortitude.”²³ Marshall and Milestone anchor their commentaries on the war in the sensory descriptions of the Korean landscape, publicizing the experiences of the infantry through their depictions of the war’s geography.

Experiential Storytelling

After establishing the critical context for this essay and before delving into an analysis of the geographic signs operating in Marshall's and Milestone's Korean War combat narratives, it is useful to examine their related approaches to storytelling. Understanding the rhetorical strategies governing the book and film versions of *Pork Chop Hill* will help explain the importance of geography to the stories that the writer and the director tell about modern warfare in Korea. Marshall and Milestone take a microscopic approach to their narratives, focusing the vast majority of their attention on the combat experiences of individual foot-soldiers, as well as squads, platoons, and companies of infantrymen. Their dual focus on ordinary soldiers and the gritty details of the combat environment takes shape as a means to grasp the concrete elements of a war that had been lost in a sea of political ambiguity.

Marshall conceives of the geographic conditions of infantry combat in visceral terms, referring to the landscape of Pork Chop as "the road of blood and fire."⁴ This sense of the immediacy of ground-level combat permeates the book, infusing the narrative with tension and driving the development of plot and theme. At the outset, Marshall provides a résumé of his service as a soldier, military analyst, and combat correspondent in both theaters of World War II and in Korea, establishing his firsthand experience as the epistemological framework for his nonfiction account. His past as a soldier and analyst lends an edge to what he calls "news work," enabling a level of tactical insight unattainable to most non-veterans.⁵ He outlines his task in clinical terms, explaining how he determines "to analyze our infantry line and its methods under pressure, to estimate whether troops are good or bad, to see what is wrong or right in our tactics."⁶ Marshall's self-conscious use of military vocabulary focuses his narrative on tactical actions taken by individual soldiers and units, thereby accentuating the sense of immediacy he generates in his storytelling.

In the decades following its release in 1959, Lewis Milestone's *Pork Chop Hill* has emerged as the defining film on the violence and political uncertainty of the Korean War from the perspective of the American infantry, who experienced it at ground level.⁷ Not surprisingly, the film adaptation relies on the original text's aura of authority to lend it credibility and marketability. The opening of the film contains the epigraph, "This is a true story, based on the book by Brig. Gen. S.L.A. Marshall." In a trailer for the film, Gregory Peck holds up a copy of the book (while standing before a wall-sized topographic map of the Korean peninsula) and praises the film for visually reproducing the book's "blunt and blistering language." Film adaptations traditionally celebrate their source material, treating its status as a

vicarious validation of the film. *Pork Chop Hill* goes to considerable lengths to identify itself with the book, which the film depicts as an account of the war that is unfettered by politics or ideology. Milestone attempts to reinforce these claims to authority by employing the real-life Lt. Joseph Clemons, who is featured in the book, as a technical advisor on the film's production. Robert Lentz asserts, "the film remains remarkably true to actual events," and he considers it "certainly the most authentic and believable chronicle of the Korean War ever put on film."²⁸ The film's visual realism indeed parallels Marshall's frank prose and forcefully conveys the intensity of ground combat.

The film combines tightness of scope with thoroughness of detail, making it a classic specimen of the combat film. Michael Evans defines the combat genre as a body of "films about war that concentrate on organized conflict between uniformed men on a battlefield—usually, but not exclusively, infantrymen."²⁹ *Pork Chop Hill* spends the vast majority of its screen time portraying soldiers in the act of fighting or bivouacking. Only sparingly does the film leave the physical battlefield to advance the subplot of the peace negotiations, and no romantic side story is developed. Evans argues that the modern combat film "has usually been at its most powerful when it has concentrated on the small rather than the big—on those that really fight—the squads and platoons of infantry rather than on the brigades and divisions."³⁰ *Pork Chop Hill* takes precisely this approach, zeroing in on one company's step-by-step actions during one day of fighting on one isolated hill.

This narrow perspective, combined with Milestone's austere cinematic style, tightens the film's focus on the topographic milieu of Pork Chop and builds emotional tension into the struggles individual soldiers face as they ascend its slopes, thereby moving the plot steadily forward and developing the theme of the Americans' confrontation with the alien landscape. Evans suggests that in a "minimalist setting," war's "murderous immediacy can be explored with precision, and the nature of war can be revealed with detail."³¹ The realism of *Pork Chop Hill* is rooted in "Milestone's long-held-and-sustained contempt for war, and especially its human cost and intellectual bankruptcies."³² Milestone's assessment of war is captured in his juxtaposition of the oblivious generals at the peace-talks with the humble Clemons, who suspects the arbitrariness of fighting over the hill, obediently executes orders nonetheless, and bears the emotional burden of both. Lawrence Quirk asserts, "War is not shown here as gung-ho glamour, but rather as a futile, often mad and pointless pursuit in which the individual soldier is the one who pays—often with his life."³³ The film examines the contradictions of war through the figure of the average foot-soldier who is caught between duty and absurdity.

Ambiguous Space and Wasted Place

Marshall's and Milestone's combat narratives represent the Korean peninsula as an inherently alien environment that confounds the Americans' attempts to adapt to it and make sense of it. The mountains and valleys that make up the battlefields in these stories manifest anxieties about the war's violence and indeterminacy. In the book and film versions of *Pork Chop Hill*, the static geography of a stalemated trench war embodies two interrelated issues: one, a terrifying uncertainty about where this war is being fought and, two, a terrible clarity regarding the catastrophic costs of the war—in terms of human life and environmental damage.

In the film *Pork Chop Hill*, the Korean peninsula initially appears tranquil and exotic, yet this pastoral atmosphere eventually gives way to desolation. Early on, King Company, commanded by Lt. Joseph Clemons, is ordered to retake the hill known as Pork Chop, which has been lost to the Chinese in the middle of the night. Subsequently, a panoramic shot observes the company convoy snaking along a shadowy valley and across a stream, heading towards the camera. The various geographic elements including the river, valley floor, mountains, and fog are arranged in layers from foreground to middle-ground to background so that each layer accentuates the idyllic tone of the other. The valley appears to be isolated from the outside world of war by the silhouette of a mountain range filling the background. The romantic quality of the valley shot is underscored by the faint glow of the sun rising behind the mountains, and the harshness of the terrain is tempered by the early morning fog blanketing the valley's recesses. This *mise-en-scène* renders the valley a prehistoric paradise rather than a modern war zone.³⁴ In this atmosphere of paradise, the military vehicles appear oddly out of place. The next shot shows King Company dismounting and marching towards Pork Chop Hill, grudgingly abandoning the tranquility and safety of the valley. They trudge past a signpost beside the road which reads, "CAUTION: THE REDS DIRECT TRAFFIC BEYOND THIS POINT." The signpost is literally and figuratively a sign in the sense that it marks the geography beyond the valley as "the landscape of the others."³⁵ The film suggests that despite American artillery, the land belongs to the North Koreans and the Chinese, and no matter how much territory the U.S. military controls, the landscape itself will always be alien and hostile to Americans.

The idyllic valley serves as a gateway into the desolate space of the battlefield. The landscape imagery shifts suddenly in a sequence of cuts that take King Company out of the valley and past the ominous sign by the roadside. Milestone accomplishes this shift by juxtaposing shots of the trucks returning through the valley with

shots of the soldiers slouching forlornly up the rugged trail leading to Pork Chop. While they march in line, one soldier after another stare regretfully at the transport trucks retreating across the river.³⁶ Milestone depicts the battlefield as a hermetic space, adjacent to the valley yet completely sealed off from it. Numerous bombed-out jeeps and tanks, ruined cannons, and miscellaneous mangled steel frames oppose the battlefield to the bucolic valley. After the camera surveys the damage that has already been done, King Company lines up along the banks of the winding stream and then fords the waters in unison. The river marks the point of no return for King Company, and the act of crossing takes on ritualistic significance for the men.³⁷

Following King Company's surge up the hill and into the outer lines of trenches, the film pauses to reflect on the damage done so far. Though little happens on screen, it is critical to the film in terms of sewing the fragments of combat together into a cohesive story. In this moment, the narrative interrupts its frenetic portrayal of infantry fighting to indicate some larger significance of the war, which it locates in the objects and features of the landscape. The scene opens with the camera peering up the slope of the hill at the horizon beyond (the sun has come up by now). The camera's gaze suggests the soldiers' illusory desire to escape the battlefield, to abandon the hill and return to the safety and comfort of the valley. However, this longing quickly proves futile as the camera pans down from the horizon and focuses on a dead American soldier. After pausing briefly on this figure, the camera slowly tracks down the slope of the hill, taking a visual catalogue of the devastation: numerous Chinese and American corpses; their hats, boots, and helmets; rifles and machine guns; empty containers of ammunition; torn stretchers; shell craters and countless shattered rocks; charred tree trunks.³⁸ The downward trajectory of the camera's movement draws the film away from the freedom of the sky and down into the landscape. The camera's movement inundates the screen with images of the broken landscape, pulling the film down into the terrain, down into the dust and rubble along with the soldiers.

Like the infantry, the film remains confined to the landscape. Milestone continually deploys the camera close to the surface of the ground or down inside the trenches, repeatedly returning the narrative to the subject of geography and the infantry's contact with it.³⁹ The trench shots mimic the chaos of the fighting as Chinese and American soldiers run back and forth across the screen. Milestone often places the camera on the floor of a trench and tilts it slightly upward at the backs or flanks of the men, exaggerating the claustrophobic quality of the trenches' enclosed spaces. As King Company makes a desperate charge to take the summit,

the camera waits at the mouth of a trench. With the camera positioned low to the ground, the trench's walls of dirt and rock frame the shot to the left and right, and the trench floor serves as the bottom frame. Sandbags piled on both sides of the trench create an artificial horizon, blocking out all but a sliver of the sky across the top of the screen. The film depicts the geography of the trenches as an incredibly isolating and dehumanizing space in which American foot-soldiers find themselves trapped. Milestone suggests that regardless of which side controls the trenches of Pork Chop, Korean geography will always confound the men's abilities to organize their experiences so that they might clearly comprehend them.

While Milestone's film showcases the ground-level devastation, Marshall's book conveys the collective uncertainty about where this war was being fought and for what purpose. The confusion is not only geopolitical. In fact, much of the war's incomprehensibility can be credited to the peculiar spatial configuration of the war zone itself. The opposing sides, of course, settled into entrenched positions after the initial attack and counterattack sequences. Contrary to expectation, the trench fighting renders the identification of friendly and hostile positions more—not less—complicated in Marshall's account. In the Korean War, ground-level assessments of territorial control are rendered increasingly unstable the more concretized the fortifications become.⁴⁰ Marshall vividly pictures the extensive fortifications in the vicinity of Pork Chop and its neighbor, Old Baldy: "To a depth of more than 20,000 yards, the Reds had entrenched and bunkered the ridges. Their defensive works had ten times the depth of any belt of entrenchments in World War I."⁴¹ The battlefield is saturated with barbed wire, mines, bunkers, machine-gun nests, and trenches. As Marshall describes the seesaw fighting in which the two sides repeatedly trade the same patches of ground, geography becomes an increasingly unknown quantity of sorts in the ever-evolving equation of infantry combat.⁴² The geographic arrangement of the trenches embodies the irony of the army's tactics, in which the troops do not move anywhere except back and forth, repeating the same violence over and over on the same terrain. For Marshall, living and fighting along the Demilitarized Zone becomes ironic to the point of futility. He suggests the prevalence of irony in the daily practices of American soldiers, observing, "There is a great deal of iron in war. There is also irony."⁴³ The irony of fighting an enemy which one's own government had no intention of defeating is readily apparent, and this political irony takes on a geographic incarnation in Marshall's book.

For Marshall, the absurdity of the battlefield's spatial orientation crystallizes in the contested geography of Pork Chop. He indicates that the American trenches on Pork Chop existed inside the nebulous zone of "no-man's country," a strip of

land that later became the Demilitarized Zone, and he dismisses the hill's tactical integrity, calling it "a contemptible hill, ill-formed to all-around defense."⁴⁴ The irony of Pork Chop's location is that "the outpost was not only dominated by the Chinese-held ridges, but in fact *extended into their country*, being on the wrong side of the valley."⁴⁵ The geographic irony dooming Pork Chop is that by virtue of its spatial configuration, friendly territory is essentially enemy territory, too. Marshall goes so far as to assert that after the Chinese captured Old Baldy, Pork Chop should have been voluntarily relinquished, thereby straightening American lines without sacrificing a defensible position. David Halberstam suggests that Pork Chop Hill became "a symbol of the sheer emptiness of the last stages of the war" insofar as the opposing sides were merely "struggling for one of the most distant outposts on the UN exterior line," an outpost with "no great strategic benefit" which was "only of value because . . . whichever side held it, the other side wanted it."⁴⁶ In Korea, friendly ground is always in the process of being redefined as enemy territory and vice versa. Marshall imagines this ironic geography as a profoundly alienating force in the lives of individual foot-soldiers, disrupting the infantry's sense of purpose in the war.

The Landscape of/as the Enemy

Marshall and Milestone represent the Korean War not simply as a struggle between American and Communist forces but as a complex set of geographic dynamics in which the landscape mediates between the human enemies and at times even stands in for the Chinese and North Koreans. Geography and the human body are thoroughly interwoven. The combat zone is littered with debris and with the corpses of friendly and enemy soldiers. In addition, the landscape—understood to be inherently alien to Americans—is identified with the enemy, who appears to possess a natural harmony with this environment which constantly impedes and repels American troops. In Korean War combat narratives, geography becomes the primary antagonist, resisting American forces while harboring and enabling the enemy.

In *The River and the Gauntlet*, Marshall portrays U.S. technology as virtually helpless against the geographic peculiarities of the Korean peninsula. He indicates that some men abandoned their short-range radios, concluding they "weren't meant to operate in Korean terrain."⁴⁷ American artillery does not perform much better, as the men faced the "main problem of finding enough flat tracts of land along the main axis of advance to base satisfactorily such artillery as the division already possessed. This was a chronic ailment in all Korean operations, and both the season

and the peculiar characteristics of the Chongchon countryside exacerbated it.³⁸ Despite his ostensibly objective role as historian and reporter, Marshall practically throws up his hands in disgust as he describes the “vastness and perversity of the ridge-ribbed countryside” and the “abnormal difficulties which the Chongchon countryside presented to a modern, motorized field force.”³⁹ This countryside is a place of “ubiquitous hills and ridges” within which “no element could be kept in a normal or practical working alignment with anything else.”⁴⁰ Marshall’s observations, and especially his use of the word “perversity,” suggest that he imagines the Korean peninsula not as a distinct complex of natural and built environments but as a loathsome abnormality to be deplored, not accommodated.

The geography of the combat zone causes tactical disorientation among the Americans on the ground: “Swatches of fog blanked out some of the low ground and made the whole scene seem unreal. Nothing could be seen of the approaching enemy. Moreover, that was why Second Platoon’s patrol had become lost, and why a reciprocal patrol sent out from First Platoon was also overdue. Both were wandering in a maze.”⁴¹ On a practical level, the land proves difficult for American soldiers to navigate. What is more interesting here is that in an attempt to describe the situation, Marshall invokes words such as “unreal” and “maze.” Labeling the landscape as “unreal” renders the place alien, not simply in terms of being strange but being impossibly so. The metaphor of the maze suggests that the land is *unnatural* in a sinister sense, as though it were a synthetic construct deliberately designed to disorient and entrap Americans.

The epistemological crises individual Americans suffer in *The River and the Gauntlet* are linked to the spatial dynamics of the combat zone: “In such an operation, men do not actually observe the battlefield. They see the world as a rabbit sees it, crouching to earth, with an eye on one little patch. On broken ground, like that of Korea, men under fire may witness nothing except possibly the lip of a bank 10 feet away, with the dust kicking up all around it as the bullets hit.”⁴² In this case, the contours that give shape to the battlefield limit the ability of individuals to see clearly. The landscape also *delimits* the world of the war for the foot-soldiers, who struggle not only to orient themselves tactically within the space of the fighting but also to formulate some sense of meaning that might impose order on the chaos of combat.

The confined world of the war zone is marked by images of corpses—American and Chinese, North Korean and South Korean—which are welded to the topography of the battlefield. Throughout much of *The River and the Gauntlet*, events unfold at a relatively rapid pace as American and South Korean units are repeatedly forced to

retreat in front of the Chinese offensive. Consequently, the narrative intermittently abandons the patches of terrain it describes in order to take up new spaces in which to recount subsequent fighting. Yet, when the retreating American and South Korean units become bogged down at a narrow pass, the narrative itself pauses as it details this distinct spatial development in the soldiers' experiences. Here the narrative shuttles back and forth along the column of retreating forces, and as it does so it gradually accumulates images of destruction, which are largely absent from the rest of the book or are drowned out by Marshall's exhaustive descriptions of the tactical actions and decision making on the part of the combatants. He describes a ditch running alongside the road on which the Americans and South Koreans are retreating: "From end to end, this sanctuary was already filled with bodies, the living and the dead, wounded men who could no longer move. . . . It was the sump pit of all who . . . had become detached from their vehicles and abandoned to each other. . . . Americans, Turks, and ROKs, their identities had become for the hour indistinguishable."³³ The level of violence temporarily erases the differences in ethnicity and identity among the allied soldiers. Layers of dead bodies and wrecked material accumulate to such a degree as to reconfigure the geography: "The passage was littered with such equipment as bedrolls, packs, tentage, air mattresses, and barracks bags. Almost continuously, the vehicles were bumping over 'soft lumps in the road.' . . . The road shoulder was also littered with the bodies of dead Americans, ROKs, and Turks, and interspersed among them, the forms of wounded men. . . . The road was no longer a road but a serpentine of rubble, wreckage, and ruin."³⁴ At this juncture in the narrative, the fluid and contested space of the war zone gets rewritten as the site of utter defeat and desolation, a wasting of human life that amounts to a moving graveyard.³⁵

Repulsive encounters with the human body are a fixture of the geography of Pork Chop. Marshall relates that during the two-day pitched battle, American soldiers often eschewed the safety of their fortifications for the lesser protection provided by random boulders and mounds of dirt. Their motivation was "to escape the death stench befouling the trenches."³⁶ The heavy attrition suffered by both sides rendered corpses ubiquitous. Many of the bodies could not be retrieved for a long while because the fighting went on night and day, and the sickening sight and smell became suffocating within the trenches. Just as human and animal corpses alike are strewn across the ground or smashed beneath artillery, so the distinctions among these various objects get flattened and begin to blur as they are assimilated into the greater geographic complex. For Marshall, the figure of the corpse becomes one of the defining features in the geography of the Korean War. He remarks that

Old Baldy was “scabrous after months of battle.”⁵⁷ By using the term “scabrous,” he does not simply merge human and environmental bodies; rather, he gives shape to the land through the imagery of the damaged human body, imagining the hill as a corpse covered with scars and sores.

Marshall and Milestone also identify living enemies with the foreign geography of the Korean peninsula. The Chinese in particular are identified by their supposed intimacy or harmony with the rugged terrain. In both *The River and the Gauntlet* and *Pork Chop Hill*, Marshall depicts the Chinese in essentialist terms. After describing the Chinese army’s practices of concealing troop movements and providing misinformation through their prisoners of war, Marshall sums up the enemy as follows: “These things were the warp and woof of the enemy pattern of deception. All were suited to the Oriental nature.”⁵⁸ He stereotypes all Chinese soldiers as “Orientals” and marks them as innately dishonest and deceptive people. In doing so, he suggests that Americans are, of course, incapable of concealment and intrigue. Along these lines, he dismisses the Chinese army as an inscrutable enigma and entertains a vague fantasy of them as a transcendently evil foe: a “phantom which cast no shadow.”⁵⁹ The strangeness and inscrutability of this racially other enemy is manifested in its peculiar relationship with the landscape. This close connection to the land distinguishes the Chinese from the Americans and South Koreans and marks the Chinese as an entity that transgresses the traditional rules of military conduct to which American forces are bound.

The rhetoric with which Marshall identifies the Chinese as a “natural” or primitive enemy is made more explicit in his later book *Pork Chop Hill*. He relates that by 1953, “They had become as tenacious and as earth-seeking as ants.”⁶⁰ Later he explains, “In two years of trench warfare, the Red Chinese soldier had become like Brother Fox. Any part of the earth was his covert and he had learned to bide his time.”⁶¹ Marshall locates the collective racial identity of the Chinese in what he imagines to be an innate identification with the land. He describes them metaphorically as communal insects and crafty predators, dehumanizing them in the process. The Chinese in his narratives take shape as animals, drawing on the land for their survival, military prowess, and racial identity. The architecture of the Chinese fortifications appears as follows: “Tunnels were put into the ridge from the rear. The tunnels led to chambers large enough to house a company or battalion. . . . The tunnel entrances were too well camouflaged to be detected through air photography.”⁶² Marshall portrays the Chinese in a natural state of harmony with the environment, deliberately and painstakingly using the landscape as an instrument of defense and attack against the Americans, who are alienated

from the foreign landscape and are forced to struggle against it.⁶³ He observes that the Americans' only successful strategy was "to lure the enemy into the open where he could be blasted by the markedly superior American artillery."⁶⁴ By 1953 the dichotomy between American technology and Korean geography had fully crystallized: "Given UN air and artillery supremacy, [the Chinese] had gradually adjusted their style of fighting. They had created quite exceptional tunnels, triumphs of raw, primitive engineering. . . . In Korea these tunnels went from Chinese positions relatively removed from the point of assault to the very mouth of an attack point."⁶⁵ The terrain itself becomes weaponized in Korean War combat narratives, made into a hybrid human-environmental enemy in which and against which Americans have no choice but to wage technologically dependent warfare.

Like Marshall, Milestone links the Chinese to the Korean geography and at times focuses on the landscape as the Americans' primary enemy. The film alternates between sequences of shots or scenes featuring either the Chinese or the hill itself as the active agents of the violence Americans suffer. During the Chinese counterattack on the hill (after King Company has captured the hill but no longer has enough men to defend it), Milestone depicts the Chinese charging up the slope *en masse*, blanketing the ground in human waves. These shots portray the Chinese as a faceless horde, an extension of the larger mass of the hill.⁶⁶ The film vests a great deal of narrative import in the hill, establishing Pork Chop as a monolithic presence that ultimately absorbs the figures of the Chinese attackers and threatens Clemons and his men. Pork Chop essentially becomes another character in the film, more than just *mise-en-scène*. Milestone repeatedly cuts back and forth between shots of the hill and shots of the advancing Americans, thereby juxtaposing the two entities. The frequency and alternating perspectives of these cuts serve to heighten the tension between the two combatants—the Americans and the hill itself—and to amplify the suspense for the audience. By repeatedly cutting between profile shots of the soldiers and angled, frontal shots of the hill, Milestone dramatizes the company's charge as an epic struggle between mortal foes. His personification of the hill culminates in a point-of-view shot taken from the crest of the hill and angled down towards the men, who peer nervously up into the camera. It is as though the hill itself is gazing down on the Americans and is rising up to halt their unsteady advance. In this way, the figure of the hill not only substitutes for the entire war zone in Korea but also embodies the Chinese and North Korean soldiers in a single enigmatic mass.

The book and film versions of *Pork Chop Hill* and *The River and the Gauntlet* concentrate on the environmental conditions of the combat zone in the process of representing the experiences of American infantrymen and the enemies and challenges they faced in Korea. These texts take shape as attempts to extricate the sacrifices of American soldiers from the uninspiring ambiguities of limited warfare and publicize them to American audiences. Yet, the apparent fact of the matter is that the works of Lewis Milestone and S.L.A. Marshall—along with those of other Korean War writers and filmmakers—did not stop the war from being ignored by the American public and lost to history. In this light, a geographic semiotics of combat narratives enables us to advance the work of resuscitating stories about the Korean War. It enables us to rethink the cultural and aesthetic significance of books and films about the fighting, and even now to continue remembering the “forgotten war.”

Notes

1. This study is an extension of the work I began in my essay on Persian Gulf War combat narratives, which appeared in *PMLA*'s special issue on War in 2009. See Geoffrey A. Wright, “The Desert of Experience: *Jarhead* and the Geography of the Persian Gulf War,” *PMLA* 124, no. 5 (2009): 1677-89.
2. See S.L.A. Marshall, *Pork Chop Hill: The American Fighting Man in Action, Korea, Spring, 1953* (New York: Jove Books, 1956) and *The River and the Gauntlet* (New York: William Morrow, 1953); *Pork Chop Hill*, DVD, directed by Lewis Milestone (1959; MGM Home Entertainment, 1999). All quotations from the film refer to this edition.
3. Some critical attention has been paid to the representation of Korean War geography in print and visual texts. See D. Melissa Hilbisch, “Advancing in Another Direction: The Comic Book and the Korean War,” *War, Literature, and the Arts* 11, no. 1 (1999): 209-27 and Philip K. Jason, “Vietnam War Themes in Korean War Fiction,” *South Atlantic Review* 61, no. 1 (1996): 109-21.
4. Most historical studies of the Korean War are concerned, directly or indirectly, with the notion of forgetting the conflict. See, for example, Clay Blair, *The Forgotten War: America in Korea, 1950-1953* (New York: Anchor Books, 1987); T.R. Fehrenbach, *This Kind of War: A Study in Unpreparedness* (New York: Macmillan, 1963); Paul Edwards, *To Acknowledge a War: The Korean War in American Memory* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2000); David Halberstam, *The Coldest Winter: America and the Korean War* (New York: Hyperion, 2007); Philip Landon, “The Korean War,” in *The Columbia Companion to American History on Film: How the Movies Have Portrayed the American Past*, ed. Peter Rollins (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).
5. Andersen, *A Century of Media, A Century of War* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 35.
6. Ehrhart, “Soldier-Poets of the Korean War,” *War, Literature, and the Arts* 9, no. 1 (1997): 4.
7. Ehrhart and Jason, eds., *Retrieving Bones: Stories and Poems of the Korean War* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999).

8. Ehrhart and Jason, eds., introduction to *Retrieving Bones: Stories and Poems of the Korean War* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999), xxii.
9. An early scene in the film *The Hunters* (1958) illustrates the film industry's struggle to come to terms with the war. Major Cleve Saville chats with Christina, the wife of his fellow fighter pilot, after the man has passed out from drinking. Christina worries about her husband's deteriorating mental health, suggesting that if he believed "that what he's doing has a bigger meaning," then he would behave more heroically. *The Hunters*, DVD, directed by Dick Powell (1958; 20th Century Fox, 2004). Cleve responds dutifully, "The war has a bigger meaning. The only trouble is it came along too soon after the real big one. It's hard to sell anybody on it." He is robotic in his unquestioning obedience, as he later tells her, "I'm regular Air Force. I don't have to be sold." Yet, his response does more to heighten Christina's doubts than it does to quell them. In seeking to justify the Korean War as a self-evident necessity, the film ends up highlighting its own underlying anxieties about the war.
10. Edwards, *A Guide to Films on the Korean War* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1997), 4.
11. Diffrient, "'Military Enlightenment' for the Masses: Genre and Cultural Intermixing in South Korea's Golden Age War Films," *Cinema Journal* 45, no. 1 (2005): 22.
12. Young, "Missing Action: POW Films, Brainwashing and the Korean War, 1954-1968," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 18, no. 1 (1998): 75.
13. Landon, "The Korean War," in *The Columbia Companion to American History on Film: How the Movies Have Portrayed the American Past*, ed. Peter Rollins (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 84.
14. James Michener, for example, became an advocate for American soldiers serving in the war. Robert Lentz explains that Michener "saw that the men were fighting and dying just as valiantly as they had in World War II, and he became determined to relate their stories to the public. He did not promote the Korean War, but rather attempted to raise the consciousness of the public regarding the men who were fighting in it." Lentz, *Korean War Filmography* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2003), 65-6. Michener's efforts to memorialize Korean War veterans in narrative are nowhere more evident than in his novel *The Bridges at Toko-Ri* and the film adapted from it. Harry Brubaker, a World War II veteran who flew in the Pacific Theater, dismisses the Korean conflict as a worthless venture, yet he grudgingly risks his own life in order to "do the job." Michener, *The Bridges at Toko-Ri* (New York: Bantam Books, 1953), 27. The film strikes a similar note as the novel, particularly at its conclusion, which features a sentimental voiceover by Admiral Tarrant, who lauds the late Brubaker by asking himself, "Where do we get such men?" *The Bridges at Toko-Ri*, DVD, directed by Mark Robson (1954; Paramount, 2001).
15. Construction of the Korean War Veterans Memorial was not begun until 1993 and was finished in 1995, over thirty years after the film was released. National Park Service, "Korean War Veterans Memorial," U.S. Department of the Interior, <http://www.nps.gov/kwvwm> (accessed 16 June 2009).
16. Marshall, *Pork Chop Hill*, 2.
17. *Ibid.*, 2.
18. *Ibid.*, 2.
19. *Ibid.*, 3.

20. Marshall, *The River and the Gauntlet*, 130.

21. *Ibid.*, 268.

22. Bill McWilliams strikes a no less impassioned stance in his more recent account of the battle for Pork Chop Hill, which he opens by asserting that however else the Korean War was labeled, “to the American soldier, both the citizen-soldier and the professional, it was war. All of it. Pure war. Pure hell. A special kind of hell.” McWilliams, *On Hallowed Ground: The Last Battle for Pork Chop Hill* (New York: Berkley Caliber Books, 2004), 1.

23. Marshall, *The River and the Gauntlet*, 216.

24. Marshall, *Pork Chop Hill*, 136.

25. *Ibid.*, 1. S.L.A. Marshall’s writing forms part of a pattern in the evolution of American combat narratives. W.D. Ehrhart, himself a poet and a Vietnam War veteran, suggests, “as soldiers have increasingly become more literate, the 20th century has seen a marked increase in the body of literature written by soldiers and veterans themselves. No longer does war await a Homer or a Tennyson or a Kipling to be translated into literature.” Ehrhart, 3. He points to the phenomenon of transforming combat experiences into literature. He states that more and more soldiers “speak for themselves, making use of creative imagination to be sure, but fueling it with the raw stuff of experience.” *Ibid.*, 3. Before Marshall was a writer, he was a Brigadier General and served as a soldier, officer, military historian, and combat correspondent during World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. His service in these varying capacities provides a platform for his writing, and a lot of writing he did. In addition to *Pork Chop Hill* and *The River and the Gauntlet*, he wrote numerous works on the United States’ other foreign wars. See, for example, *Ambush* (New York: Cowles, 1969) and *Fields of Bamboo* (New York: Dial Press, 1971) and *Night Drop: The American Airborne Invasion of Italy* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1962).

26. Marshall, *Pork Chop Hill*, 1.

27. By the time he directed the film adaptation of *Pork Chop Hill*, Lewis Milestone was already famous for his World War I adaptation *All Quiet on the Western Front*. See *All Quiet on the Western Front*, DVD, directed by Lewis Milestone (1930; Universal Home Video, 1999). The film is a scathing anti-war critique and a benchmark of the combat-film genre. He had also directed the World War II adaptation *A Walk in the Sun*, set during the Allied invasion of Italy. See *A Walk in the Sun*, directed by Lewis Milestone (Twentieth Century Fox, 1945). The sequential production of these three films on three different wars has prompted at least one critic to label them “Milestone’s unofficial war trilogy.” Robert Lentz, 280. Milestone’s lengthy experience in making war films from different eras lends him unusual insight into crafting the gritty *mise-en-scène* and concrete action scenes in *Pork Chop Hill*.

28. Lentz, *Korean War Filmography* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2003), 281-2.

29. Evans, “The Serpent’s Eye: The Cinema of 20th-Century Combat,” *Military Review* 82, no. 6 (2002): 87.

30. *Ibid.*, 88.

31. *Ibid.*, 88.

32. Lawrence Quirk, *The Great War Films* (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1994), 167.

33. *Ibid.*, 170.

34. An analogous scene occurs in the novel *The Bridges at Toko-Ri*, in which James Michener projects a primitivist fantasy onto the country's mountainous terrain. The narrator relates Brubaker's impressions of the landscape: "Tortured and convoluted, they twisted up at the two fleeting jets, the terrible mountains of Korea. They were the mountains of pain, the hills of death. They were the scars of the world's violent birth." Michener, 61. Brubaker manages to cope with his own fear of dying by projecting those feelings onto the landscape. He identifies the mountains as the source of his emotional pain and as an omen of his impending death. Brubaker's fantasies enable him to make sense of his fear by casting it in the context of a mythic confrontation between man and nature. Entering the environment of the combat zone becomes for him an act of returning to the place of human origin, a place that exists beyond the boundaries of civilization.

35. Svend Larsen, "Landscape, Identity, and War," *New Literary History* 35, no. 3 (2004): 477. Larsen investigates the ideological struggle inherent to warfare: "The landscape of war is always the landscape of the others, the barbarians, the enemy, or the monsters. War as a quest for identity has nowhere to place that identity, no landscape proper, only a tactical landscape that belongs to others." *Ibid.*, 477.

36. The montage alludes to the famous sequence in Milestone's earlier film *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930), in which Paul Baumer and his platoon mates each take turns gazing longingly back at the truck which has deposited them for the first time on the front lines. In both films, crossing into the combat zone is a transformative act, and the characters anticipate this fact but are unable to articulate it.

37. John Irvin's Vietnam War film *Hamburger Hill* (1987) echoes this scene. See *Hamburger Hill*, DVD, directed by John Irvin (1987; Artisan Entertainment, 1998). In the film, a company of Airborne is deployed into the jungle. They begin their patrol at the foot of Hill 937 by passing out of a clearing and crossing a river. As they do so, the epigraph "10 May 1968" appears, suggesting a second beginning for the soldiers and for the film itself.

38. Milestone's vision of the hill echoes Marshall's sensory, and often pejorative, descriptions of it. Marshall characterizes the Korean landscape as a junkyard, observing that Old Baldy, the hill neighboring Pork Chop, looked "like a refuse dump." Marshall, *Pork Chop Hill*, 32. He blames the ruined condition of the battlefield on the combination of two factors: 1) the static possession of territory in the latter two-thirds of the war, and 2) the heavy use of artillery on entrenched positions by both Chinese and American forces. Describing Pork Chop, Marshall observes, "its cratered slopes will not soon bloom again, for they are too well planted with rusty shards and empty tins and bones." *Ibid.*, 146. Marshall imagines military technology ultimately canceling out any romantic fantasies about Korea.

39. Milestone's cinematography recalls that of an earlier Korean War combat film, Anthony Mann's *Men in War* (1957), which begins with the epigraph: "Tell me the story of the foot soldier and I will tell you the story of all wars." *Men in War*, DVD, directed by Anthony Mann (1957; Geneon Entertainment, 2005). Indeed, the film distills the story of combat in the Korean War into the minute details of one American outfit's journey back through enemy territory to reunite with the rest of the company (the film begins *in medias res*, soon after a firefight). Along the way, the film follows the men with microscopic focus as they encounter an episodic series of trials in which they are ambushed by snipers and bombarded by enemy artillery and get lost in a minefield in a forest. By homing in on the soldiers' experiences while they traverse the Korean countryside on foot, *Men in War* draws on the physical objects and contours of the landscape as the source for its themes of alienation and confusion. True to the combat-film genre, *Men in War* never wavers from this portrayal of the infantry's intimate relationship with the environment.

40. The fortifications of the two sides became formidable indeed. James Marino explains that by the summer of 1952, "both sides had constructed such strong defensive lines that neither could undertake a major offensive without suffering unacceptable losses." Marino, "Meat Grinder on Pork Chop Hill," *Military History* 20, no. 1 (2003): 43. David Halberstam similarly notes, "By mid-1952, the war had begun to resemble more than anything else the worst of the First World War: trench warfare, days and nights of living under constant artillery barrages. . . . By then both sides had created seemingly unassailable extensive defensive lines." Halberstam, 628.

41. Marshall, *Pork Chop Hill*, 82.

42. Harmon Jones' film *Target Zero* (1955) explores this spatial confusion in the Korean War. See *Target Zero*, directed by Harmon Jones (Warner Brothers, 1955). The story features a patchwork unit of American and British soldiers who are cut off from the main body of their respective forces. The men confront a series of obstacles during their return to a hill outpost, only to find that their company has been wiped out and that they in turn must hold the hill against the North Koreans, who are now retreating in their direction ahead of a massive American counterattack from the south. The film displays the epistemological instability of Korean geography by collapsing spatial distinctions such as "enemy" or "friendly" territory. As these spaces are merged, the film destabilizes the once reliable binaries of danger/safety and known/unknown.

43. Marshall, *Pork Chop Hill*, 5.

44. *Ibid.*, 189, 82.

45. *Ibid.*, 82, my italics.

46. Halberstam, *The Coldest Winter: America and the Korean War* (New York: Hyperion, 2007), 629.

47. Marshall, *The River and the Gauntlet*, 15.

48. *Ibid.*, 29.

49. *Ibid.*, 145 and 58.

50. *Ibid.*, 58.

51. *Ibid.*, 93.

52. *Ibid.*, 234.

53. *Ibid.*, 220.

54. *Ibid.*, 251-54.

55. The conclusion of Michener's novel *The Bridges at Toko-Ri* is located in an equally horrid landscape. After Brubaker is shot down during his bombing run, he takes cover in a ditch that turns out to be a sewage reservoir for the adjacent rice paddies. Michener, 95. Geography and the human body are woven together in the texture of the landscape, which is comprised of soil and human feces. By locating Brubaker's personal battlefield in a sewer, Michener plays on the notion of the Korean War as a waste, a futile exercise in nascent Cold War doctrine. Here waste becomes literal human excrement, a symbol for the wasting of human life in the war. Tim O'Brien echoes this scene by having Kiowa killed in an ambush in a "shit field." O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 185. While the platoon searches for his body through thigh-deep sewage, O'Brien meditates on the frailty of individual platoon members serving in the Vietnam War, a war they hated and struggled to understand.

56. Marshall, *Pork Chop Hill*, 116.

57. *Ibid.*, 32.

58. Marshall, *The River and the Gauntlet*, 8.

59. *Ibid.*, 248, 1.

60. Marshall, *Pork Chop Hill*, 7.

61. *Ibid.*, 142.

62. *Ibid.*, 10.

63. Marshall's portrayal of the relationship between the Chinese and the Korean landscape anticipates depictions of the North Vietnamese in Vietnam War texts. For example, Michael Herr describes the tactical division of the landscape between Americans and North Vietnamese: "The ground was always in play, always being swept. Under the ground was his, above it was ours. We had the air . . . we could run but we couldn't hide, and he could do each so well." Herr, *Dispatches* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 14. Herr establishes a racial dichotomy between the North Vietnamese and the Americans, conferring on the North Vietnamese a special union with the land, while identifying American troops with technological advancement and environmental ignorance. Tunnels became a motif in Vietnam War combat narratives. See, for example, Tim O'Brien, *Going After Cacciato* (New York: Broadway Books, 1978) and *Platoon*, DVD, directed by Oliver Stone (1986; MGM, 2001). These texts portray the tunnels as a kind of netherworld controlled by a dark enemy (read both "evil" and "non-white").

64. Marshall, *Pork Chop Hill*, 178.

65. David Halberstam, 628.

66. The only Chinese who are given faces in the film are the propagandist who communicates with Americans via loudspeakers strung throughout the trenches and the diplomats participating in the peace talks at Panmunjom. The propagandist is clearly a vile figure, and though the negotiations play a secondary role in the film, these intermittent scenes imagine the Chinese as irrational and sadistic barbarians who doggedly adhere to a misguided ideology.

GEOFFREY A. WRIGHT is Assistant Professor of English at Samford University, where he directs the Film Studies concentration in the English major. He has published essays on American war literature and film as well as Southern art in *PMLA*, *Genre*, and *The Southern Quarterly*.