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## Vietnam and Verisimilitude: Rethinking the Relationship between “Postmodern War” and Naturalism

In 2010, Atlantic Monthly Press, a well-respected imprint of Grove Atlantic, Inc., released *Matterhorn: A Novel of the Vietnam War*.<sup>1</sup> The text, authored by Marine Corps combat veteran Karl Marlantes, is a wonderful prospect for inclusion into the canon of traditional American war literature. By “traditional American war literature,” I mean the school of representing war for which Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895) is the model text and for which the use of naturalist aesthetics becomes a means of bridging the gap between those who have experienced the horror of industrialized combat and those who have not. Fredric Jameson approvingly refers to such texts as those invested in conveying war’s “sense datum,” which is to say texts striving to produce a simulacrum of “the existential experience of war” (“War” 1534).<sup>2</sup> According to Marlantes, this is exactly the project he undertook in crafting *Matterhorn*, a thirty-five-year-long process that saw him revising his novel repeatedly, while collecting a stream of rejection letters. In January 2010, Marlantes wrote in *Publishers Weekly* that the Vietnam War opened a “chasm” in American culture that he hoped his fiction could “bridge” in some way. Marlantes states,

Ultimately, the only way we're ever going to bridge the chasms that divide us is by transcending our limited viewpoints. My realization of this came many years ago reading Eudora Welty's great novel *Delta Wedding*. I experienced what it would be like to be a married woman on a Mississippi delta plantation who was responsible for orchestrating one of the great symbols of community and love. I entered her world and expanded beyond my own skin and became a bigger person.

In citing the bridging of "chasms" as his ambition in writing *Matterhorn*, Marlantes reflects an anachronistic understanding of language's nature, as well as literature's purpose. Marlantes' comments—as well as his novel, I argue below—assume that language is relatively stable, that language can represent even extreme events with accuracy, and that the goal of literature is to communicate human experience such that identification, empathy, and community are reading's proper outcomes.

I suspect that it is on account of its successful realization of these assumptions and prerogatives that *Matterhorn* has been reviewed quite favorably in the popular press.<sup>3</sup> I suspect, too, that it is on this score that officer candidates at the United States Military Academy in West Point, New York, already were reading the novel in English and history courses by the Spring 2011 semester, as I learned recently in casual conversation with a professor and friend of mine who teaches there. And I further suspect that the novel will be underread by most academics, with few if any journal articles published about it, and that it will go untaught at the vast majority of American universities and colleges—although the fact that the text checks in at nearly 600 pages may have something to do with this last eventuality, particularly on the undergraduate level, should it arise. My bet is that *Matterhorn* will be consigned to the pile of naturalist Vietnam War novels that already have been largely forgotten—novels such as Larry Heinemann's harrowing first fiction, *Close Quarters* (1977). The reason for this is the privileging, among most academics, of contemporary war literatures that supposedly reject what Lucas Carpenter calls "the meticulous mimesis of the human-as-animal experience of war," which, of course, is precisely the stuff of the naturalist war text. In place of this aesthetic, academic critics favor contemporary works that appear to deny "the possibility of such representation because it entails notions of objective truth and depends on Western historical metanarrative for its justification" (30).<sup>4</sup> As even a cursory search of the MLA International Bibliography will show—readers might compare how many "hits" they turn up for "O'Brien, Tim," as opposed to "Caputo, Philip"—"postmodern" Vietnam War literature has won out over "traditional"

Vietnam War literature. I contend below that not only is this an unfortunate event for literary studies, but more than that this reflects dangerous misunderstandings of the Vietnam War and American military actions that have followed on its heels.

### **The Vietnam War was not Postmodern**

The first and foundational misunderstanding of which I write is the supposition that the American War in Vietnam was “postmodern.” This misunderstanding leads to a corollary fallacy: to represent the Vietnam War effectively, one must appropriate postmodern techniques.<sup>5</sup> This fallacy may be traced to the work of Jameson himself, in particular his statement that the Vietnam War was the “first terrible postmodernist war” (*Postmodernism* 44). Reading Michael Herr’s *Dispatches* (1977), Jameson argues that this text recognizes a

breakdown of all previous narrative paradigms [that] is, along with the breakdown of any shared language through which a veteran might convey such experience, among the principle subjects of the book and may be said to open up the place of a whole new reflexivity. (44-45)

Jameson grounds this claim by referring to the American War in Vietnam as being different than any war that preceded it. He argues that that then-new American military effort—especially in its emphasis on small-unit engagements made possible by the ubiquitous use of helicopters as troop-carrying and fire-support devices in Vietnam<sup>6</sup>—“does not, like the older modernist machinery of the locomotive or the airplane, represent motion, but which can only be represented *in motion*” (45, author’s emphasis). For Jameson, then, it is the special work of *Dispatches* to create an aesthetic document that embodies this motion. And this aesthetic, Jameson clarifies, should be read in distinction to the “older naturalism,” which he characterizes as follows:

The older naturalism let us briefly experience the life and the life world of the various underclasses, only to return with relief to our own living rooms and armchairs; the good resolutions it may have encouraged were always, then, a form of philanthropy. (286)

While Jameson may be correct here in citing the creation of catharsis as a potential danger of the naturalist aesthetic, he is mistaken in his reading both of the Vietnam War and *Dispatches*. To take the second contention first, *Dispatches* should be

read as a text that exposes the failure of the Vietnam War as a modern, if limited, conflict—the war’s degeneration from plans to “modernize” an agrarian culture into aimless killing.<sup>7</sup> Herr himself writes that the Vietnam War was “a story that was as simple as it had always been, men hunting men, a hideous war and all kinds of victims” (214). The Vietnam War was no more postmodern than were the Indian wars of the Colonial Era. Like the early attempts to settle the American West, the U.S. effort in Vietnam combined the ideology of Manifest Destiny with the realities of attrition as a military strategy, all the while attempting to exploit a radical technological imbalance between government forces and “natives.”<sup>8</sup> The distinction between the Vietnam War and the early Indian wars, therefore, is not one between the postmodern and the pre-modern, but rather one between the modern and the pre-modern; the Vietnam War exists on the opposite side of history from early settlements, a line demarcated by the rise of industrial capitalism and its use as a way to turn a state’s economy into a wildly productive-destructive force in the service of warfare. The Vietnam War was a modern war through and through, one that coupled progressive ideology to a fully realized military-industrial complex and nationalism—the three main ingredients necessary for modern war. On the one hand, the experience of Vietnam for soldiers and witnesses, especially insofar as the conflict did degenerate into purposeless killing, readily opens itself to effective postmodern representation; yet if Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1968) can be taken as a reliable guide, so too does the Second World War. On the other hand, the Vietnam War also can be taken as evidence of the animalistic evil embedded in human nature, an evil it is the work of idealism to conceal and which it is the work of naturalism to unveil. To understand the war on this level, therefore, we need naturalist texts such as the one Marlantes has afforded us.<sup>9</sup>

Steven Best and Douglas Kellner appear to recognize something of this in their attempts to “map” the postmodern. In drawing a distinction between the modern era and the postmodern, Best and Kellner write,

Where the modern adventure was predicated on the values of domination, endless growth, mastery of nature, and a cornucopian world of limitless resources, a key aspect of the postmodern adventure is the systematic dismantling of this modern ideology [ . . . ]. (11)

For Best and Kellner, the ideology that drove the Vietnam War can be linked definitively to modernist assumptions, while the war’s practice also can be described as modern. As they write, the war “attempted to increase U.S. global

power by containing ‘communism’ and by imposing a consumer economy on Vietnam under the ideology of modernization” (71). As Chris Hables Gray points out, such an attempt bears striking parallels to what the U.S. witnessed during the Civil War—a conflict, I hasten to add, which represents Americans’ first experience of modern war and the beginning of war’s march toward the total, a process fully realized with the atomic bombings of Japan in 1945. Gray writes,

Attrition, diplomacy, technology, and economic war (in that it aimed at economic power and civilian working morale) were the main pillars of the U.S. government’s strategy in both cases. The difference was that the predominant Confederate strategy of aggressive main-force battle was quite unlike the “people’s war” of the Vietnamese. The Vietnamese and the Confederates did share a realization that their best chance of victory was political, and it would increase as the conflict dragged on. The Confederates just couldn’t last. (116)<sup>10</sup>

American defeat in Vietnam should be understood as a defunct modernist project, one Michael Bibby correctly terms an attempted imposition of “Newtonian rationalism and enlightenment modernity on the non-Western other” (158). Inasmuch, the war’s failure, as read by the American public, gave rise to widespread suspicion toward modernity itself, serving as a key enabler of a semi-realized postmodern condition that rejects the quest for an ultimate signified in favor of history’s erasure via the continues slide of signifiers—the dichotomy between efficiency and waste replaced by endless permutations of desire, which Jameson, referencing Ernest Mandel, rightly deems “a *purier* stage of capitalism than any of the moments that preceded it” (*Postmodernism* 3, author’s emphasis). The Vietnam War was not postmodern, we may conclude, although it did prove a key factor in the uneven and partial transition from the modern to the postmodern.

### **Baudrillard’s Bombshell in Hindsight**

Here arises the second foundational misunderstanding of the Vietnam War that concerns me: the conflation of the postmodern condition with “postmodern war.” There is a widespread assumption, one that occurs even among those academics who see the Vietnam War as a modern conflict, which holds that because the Vietnam War enabled the rise of postmodern culture, it necessarily must have given rise to “postmodern war.”<sup>11</sup> This too is a fallacy, the chief disseminator of which is Jean Baudrillard, although Best and Kellner fall victim as well in calling the Gulf War

the first “postmodern war,” a claim they ground by arguing that during the Gulf War we witnessed “a decline of the norms of modern epistemology and politics [ . . . wherein] distinctions between truth and lies, reality and simulation, and public discourse and propaganda eroded” (73, 79).<sup>12</sup> One problem with such a claim is the rather thorny fact that during every modern war the distinctions between discourse and propaganda, and reality and simulation, have eroded—witness Abraham Lincoln, on November 19, 1863, using just two hundred and seventy-two words to turn a blood-soaked field in the middle of nowhere into hallowed ground. But even more than this, what Best and Kellner, as well as Baudrillard, miss is that the Gulf War did not take place—did not take place for reasons other than those Baudrillard offers.

For him, the Gulf War was a “postmodern war”—a war-that-is-not-one, as it were—because warfare itself supposedly underwent a wholesale change after the collapse of the Soviet Union. He argues that the Cold War gives way to a “New World Order,” one that sees first-world nations using the principles of deterrence as the major means of jostling for power, rendering actual war—which for Baudrillard entails “murderous, fratricidal, sacrificial and interminable (1914 style) war” (32)—increasingly unlikely. Hence, we now are living with “the corpse of war.” Baudrillard writes,

After the hot war (the violence of conflict), after the cold war (the balance of terror), here comes the dead war—the unfrozen cold war—which leaves us to grapple with the corpse of war and the necessity of dealing with this decomposing corpse which nobody from the Gulf has managed to revive. America, Saddam Hussein and the Gulf powers are fighting over the corpse of war. (23)

There is a yearning for “(1914 style) war,” Baudrillard implies, yet we have passed into an historical age when that yearning’s satiation becomes unlikely—deterrence by the virtual rendering the odds minute. What happens, then, is the desire for war persists, even when its signified—desire passing into action, and “(1914 style) war” taking place—is removed. Therefore, we are left with sliding acts of signification that move toward what Baudrillard calls “spectacle.” He writes,

Unlike earlier wars, in which there were political aims either of conquest or domination, what is at stake in this one is war itself: its status, its meaning, its future. [ . . . ] In the absence of the (greatly diminished)

will to power, and the (problematic) will to knowledge, there remains today the widespread will to spectacle, and with it the obstinate desire to preserve its spectre or fiction [. . .]. Can war be saved? (32)

For Baudrillard, the answer to this question is “no,” insofar as “there will undoubtedly be no resolution of this situation” (50). With this “no,” then, “(1914 style) war” dies, and so too does the prospect of a “(1914 style)” critique of war, one that seeks to expose the gap between propaganda and the horror of combat (the implication being that the naturalist war text now is irrelevant). Rather than a call to critique, Baurillard urges us to become “more virtual than events themselves, do not seek to re-establish the truth, we do not have the means” (66-67).

Baudrillard is correct that the age of 1914-style war probably has ended, although his placement of this at the conclusion of the Cold War arrives as a bizarre misreading of historical events: the end of 1914-style war took place in 1945, when the United States bombed Hiroshima and Nagasaki with atomic weapons, pushing the logic of total war to its conclusion and thereby opening a non-space for total war, a funereal space in which total war comes to mean nuclear winter; this then renders total war’s status as a way station toward “victory” and “peace” moot. It is for this reason that John F. Kennedy found it necessary to reassure Americans in 1960 that there remained “unsolved problems of peace and war” and that “the battles are not all won.” And it is for this reason, too, that the United States and myriad other powers have embarked on “limited” wars since World War II, which, while not total in their intent or execution, most certainly are modern in their ideological underpinnings and their practices. Furthermore, a decade of War on Terror now has shown us that the Gulf War was itself not a war; that is, the Gulf War was no more a war than was The Battle of Ia Drang in 1965. The Gulf War was an opening salvo of a more than twenty-year-long struggle that sees the United States working to modernize Iraq, in addition to other Middle Eastern states. Therefore, the foundational storyline on which the naturalist war text depends—beginning with the optimistic designs of war planners and ending with a descent into a kind of barbarism that exposes the limits of modern ideology—remains our storyline. In terms of the Iraq War, Thomas E. Ricks relates this paradigm as one that began with a “grandiose” goal of “transform[ing] Iraq and the Middle East,” but which descends into “the quietly restated U.S. goal [. . .] to keep Iraq together, and to prevent the war from metastasizing into a regional bloodbath” (164).<sup>13</sup> For the American soldier—he or she long having been the focal point for the American

naturalist war text—this means year after year of what Iraq War veteran-author Colby Buzzell terms “insurgent fishing.” He writes,

What usually happened is we’d throw our lure out there, and then when we reeled it in, we’d notice that we’d only gotten a nibble, maybe an RPG or an IED. And then they’d drop the bait and take off. Thus, fishing for insurgents [ . . . ] can become an extremely frustrating ordeal, because you know that they are out there, but you just can’t see them. (169)

Were we to remove the term “IED” from this quotation, Buzzell might be writing of the Vietnam War.<sup>14</sup> Were we also to replace “RPG” with “ambush,” and “insurgents” with “savages,” he might be writing of the Indian wars.

### **How the Naturalist War Text Works**

The naturalist war text, then, is an aesthetic document that serves to remind us of the continuities all wars share—their movement from optimistic plans to deathly realities. More particularly, the naturalist war text is a document that reminds us of how the modern era raises the stakes of this movement immeasurably, adding to the already extant horrors of combat the destructive potency of industrial capitalism, whether this last is centered in the West (as during World War I and World War II) or increasingly is transitioned to the developing world (as is happening today). The naturalist war text insists on history not as an progression of ideas divorced from the bodies that articulate and enact them—as modernist ideology tends to have things—but rather as a breathing, chaotic, and typically tragic series of events which always, in some way or another, tend toward death. Naturalism in Stephen Crane, for example, corrupts the glow that attaches itself to a Union preserved. Naturalism in Erich Maria Remarque upsets the dichotomous rhetorics of World War I—the us-versus-them dynamic inherent to warfare—and forces non-German readers to confront the human and the enemy in simultaneity. Naturalism in James Jones, whose theoretical exploration of war and its literature I take up now, foregrounds the terror and evil everywhere present during World War II, deconstructing the “Good War” and John Wayne-style cant. In the American tradition, naturalist war literature does this almost exclusively by focusing on what Jones terms “THE EVOLUTION OF A SOLDIER” (13, author’s emphasis). This evolution occurs beneath and is obscured by the airy abstractions of those who declare, plan, and memorialize war; the naturalist text that explores this evolution, then, takes for its subject matter “your average anonymous soldier, or pilot, or naval

gunnery rating who has to carry them [the plans] out on the ground. Where there is a vast difference between grandiose logic [ . . . ] and what takes place on the terrain” (13).

To explore the soldier’s evolution effectively, the naturalist war text must work urgently against its own limits, or what we might term its inability to call pain into being after the fact, language’s status as simulacrum rendering a representation of pain in its full measure—its total immediacy—impossible. As Jones writes, “Physiologically we are so constructed that it is impossible for us to remember pain. We can remember the experience of having had pain but we cannot recall the pain itself. Try it sometime” (16). We also are so constructed linguistically. Nevertheless, it is the job of the naturalist war text to get as close as possible to recalling in full the pain that attaches itself to the experience of combat. That this goal is one that must admit its own lack should not be taken as a sign that the naturalist approach is invalid; it also is impossible to recall the pain of extreme poverty in its entirety, yet John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) moved a nation to reconsider the plight of the destitute during The Great Depression. In short, close enough can be enough to engender empathy. To realize such empathy for those affected by modern war, the naturalist war novel tends to enact a three-fold structure identified quite famously by Paul Fussell. As Fussell contends, traditional war literatures of the twentieth-century—and the twenty-first, I should add here—tend to represent the soldier’s evolution by beginning with a period of innocence, before moving on to show readers soldiers experiencing the horror of battle, and then ending with a period of post-conflict consideration. As Fussell argues, “By applying to the past a paradigm of ironic action, a rememberer is enabled to locate, draw forth, and finally shape into significance an event or a moment which otherwise would merge without meaning into the general undifferentiated stream” (30).<sup>15</sup>

The march to war, Jones tell us, is one rife with the allure of a homosocial adventure divorced from the feminine (sometimes literally, always figuratively), as well as everyday ambiguities. Lest readers believe that such allure died in the jungles of Vietnam—allure which for Fussell would be better called “innocence”—Anthony Swofford informs us that that is exactly the adventure toward which he looked forward during the run-up to the Gulf War. Of watching the major cinematic texts of the Vietnam War, Swofford writes,

Vietnam war films are all pro-war, no matter what the supposed message [ . . . ] because the magic brutality of the films celebrates the terrible and despicable beauty of their [soldiers and Marines’] fighting skills.

Fight, rape, war, pillage, burn. Filmic images of death and carnage are pornography for the military man; with film you are stroking his cock, tickling his balls with the pink feather of history, getting him ready for his real First Fuck. It doesn't matter how many Mr. and Mrs. Johnsons are antiwar—the actual killers who know how to use the weapons are not. (6-7)

The period of innocence will end when a subsequent period of experience exposes the frankly stupid nature of innocence itself, for, as Graham Greene writes, “Innocence is a kind of insanity” (155). With the onset of experience—the entrance into combat's horror—one sees the animal in the human, or the human-as-animal. This always is the subject of naturalism, whether it treats war or some other subject, which may suggest that we should take seriously the musings of Cormac McCarthy's Judge to the effect that, “War is god” (249). Jones describes the truths the experience of combat unveils as follows:

There had to be something somewhere in all of them, in all of us, that loved it. Some dark, aggressive, masochistic side of us, racial perhaps, that makes us want to spray our blood in the air, throw our blood away, for some damned misbegotten ideal or other. Whether the ideal is morally right or wrong makes no difference so long as the desire to fight for it remains in us. It was territory, back when we were animals. Now that we have evolved into higher beings and learned to talk, territoriality has moved up a step higher with us, and become ideals. We like it. Cynical as it sounds, one is lead to believe that only the defeated and the dead *really* hate war. And of course, as we all know, they do not count. (42, author's emphasis)

It is this that naturalism exposes, or tries to expose, thrusting itself against the limits of human physiology and language to counter the fact that war “can have a haunting beauty at a far remove” (48).

The naturalistic war tale, therefore, is a descent from innocence through experience to consideration, a paradigm whose tone is ironic—indeed, whose essential structure is ironic—and whose endpoint is a kind of knowledge forever coupled to the bodies on which it has been inscribed. With the following aside, Jones encapsulates this aesthetic in a single paragraph:

One of the most poignant stories about our outfit was one I didn't see myself, but only heard about later. [ . . . ] One of our platoon sergeants, during a relatively light Japanese attack on his position, reached into his hip pocket for a grenade he'd stuck there, and got it by the pin. The pin came out but the grenade didn't. [ . . . ] What he did was turn away and put his back against a bank to smother the grenade away from the rest of the men. He lived maybe five or ten minutes afterward, and the only thing he said, in a kind of awed, scared, very disgusted voice, was, "What a fucking recruit trick to pull." (53)

As we see here, the endpoint of soldiering, and also the endpoint of the naturalist war text, is trying to live in the wake of a "final full acceptance of the fact that [one's . . . ] name is already written down in the rolls of the already dead" (54). The naturalist war text is both an embodiment and a deconstruction of the uncomfortable truth that a "single infantryman in a war [ . . . ] was about as noteworthy and important as a single mosquito in an airplane-launched DDT spray campaign" (62). In cultural terms, the naturalist war text serves as a constant rejoinder that, "The arrival of unforeseen difficulties is probably the only absolute certainty in war" (64). It also reminds us—and this remains especially important today, even in the age of the All Volunteer Force—that "most of the commanding was done by the upper classes, and most of the fighting was done by the lower" (70). In the naturalist war text, these "lower" find a voice, a chance to tell us what it's like, "When you've had your own ass shot off once or twice" (113). In this, the naturalist war text is a subversion of war's injunction that the individual participant "accept anonymity," which Jones calls "perhaps the toughest step of all for the combat soldier" (122). This aesthetic therefore is a kind of signifying, or, as Jones has it, a kind of "duplicity" (122).

### **Marlantes' Achievement**

Karl Marlantes' *Matterhorn* is a text that is decidedly duplicitous and self-consciously so, which readers learn just after the novel's dedication. Beginning with the copyright page, Marlantes demonstrates his command over the naturalist aesthetic, as well as his awareness that it is an artifice—a means of representing war, which is to say, a construction. Clearly uneasy here that readers may make too much of the sometimes unflattering characterizations of high-ranking officers that follow, Marlantes tells us that while, "Novels need villains and heroes, and the ones in this novel are invented," he "served under two fine battalion commanders" in Vietnam. Marlantes chooses naturalism as an aesthetic for *Matterhorn*, so as to

afford readers a window onto “officers and enlisted men who exemplified all the character, skill, and bravery that make one proud to be a Marine.” Naturalism will enable Marlantes to showcase the costs borne by those willing to serve democratic principles to the degree that they offer up their lives to them. He will subject his soldier-characters to the ironic journey that is the innocence-experience-consideration paradigm, even heightening the horror these characters undergo by way of introducing obscenely callous commanders, thereby returning the story of the war to the bodies that fought it. Not only does Marlantes do this successfully vis-à-vis the American combat veteran of Vietnam, he has repositioned readers to make a similar leap relevant to the soldiers and civilians affected by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, among other places.

To center his effort, Marlantes chooses for his protagonist a Lieutenant Waino Mellas, who as a low-ranking officer moves between the day-to-day slog that is the rifleman’s tour in Vietnam, and the field-level war planning carried out by his superiors. From the standpoint of dramatic resonance, the negative impact of this choice is that in *Matterhorn*, Marlantes cannot claim nearly the degree of innocence for Mellas that Crane claims for Henry Fleming. On the other hand, the reader is afforded a much more thorough entrée into tactics in Marlantes’ text than he or she enjoys while reading *The Red Badge of Courage*. At any rate, Mellas does begin his tour in Vietnam as an “innocent,” insofar as he believes he can hold himself—his intellect, his emotions, his ambitions, his body—above the fray. As Marlantes writes, “Mellas swore he’d succumb to none of it” (2). Mellas’ innocence is a kind of modernist conceit: armed with an Ivy League degree and a field command, Mellas believes he can use the war as a steppingstone onto bigger and better things, namely a post-war political career. There are two main areas of conflict Marlantes will introduce into the novel so as to disabuse Mellas of this assumption. The first is the horror that is combat—the traditional vehicle by which the naturalist war text initiates a transition from innocence to experience—while the second is racial conflict. Witnessing and participating in combat’s horror will show Mellas, and *Matterhorn*’s readers, that grand modernist designs have a nasty habit of concealing and precipitating bloodshed. Racial conflict in the novel, then, will reveal to Mellas and readers that this dynamic, rather than being one exclusive to foreign policy, is in fact embedded in America’s domestic history and domestic present. As soon as the novel opens, Mellas already has begun to struggle with these matters, which we learn on being afforded the following window into his thinking:

Mellas was supposed to be fighting a war. No one at the Basic School had said he'd be dealing with junior Malcolm X's and redneck Georgia crackers. [. . .] Did the platoon commanders on Iwo Jima have to deal with crap like this? (2-3)

These are the types of thoughts that occupy Mellas when he dons "boots [. . .] still shiny and black" (3). In leading Mellas and readers to experience, Marlantes insists that both engage the minutia of this war, a type of evil characterized by boredom and banalities that at once hide and cause occasional eruptions of outright terror.

It is this insistence that sanctions Marlantes' selection of verisimilitude as a representational tactic through which he can enact the ironic structure on which the naturalist war text relies for its power. Readers learn about weaponry, plans, hierarchy, training regimes, and so on, in sometimes overwhelming detail. Likewise, in telling us all about these products and projects of modernity, the novel appears to be leading readers toward a decisive battle for a hilltop called Matterhorn, violence promising to serve as a means toward progress. That this will not happen—that the products and projects of modernity will fail in *Matterhorn*—is the truth Mellas and readers will be forced to consider at the text's conclusion. The fact that readers already know this about the Vietnam War and are re-learning similar lessons as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan continue—in short, that readers ostensibly know this type of failure always is possible with the onset of war—only bolsters the impact of *Matterhorn*'s irony. This is a novel less interested in making it new than in getting it right. It is a novel set upon creating war out of art, not the reverse—a text fully committed to making readers see what it means when, "Darkness and fear replaced light and reason" (41).

Inasmuch, *Matterhorn* is distinguished by a decided absence of John Wayne theatrics, in addition to the cloying ruefulness we often find in texts such as those of O'Brien or Swofford. Marlantes subjects his soldier-characters to a series of terrifying jungle patrols during which, "the smears of purple and orange Kool-Aid on their [Marines'] lips combined with the fear in their eyes to make them look like children returning from a birthday party at which the hostess had shown horror films" (49). Marlantes' war is one of "Effort. Weight. Flies. Cuts. Vegetation" (49). Yes, those issues, as punctuated by the obscenity that is violent death. In moving from a state of innocence to one of experience, Mellas discovers that "no strategy was perfect. All choices were bad in some way" (82). And all choices lead toward violence, combat a release from ambiguity that ironically leads to increasing ambiguity. That is, as an event-in-itself, combat isolates a single moment or at least

a definable series of moments, reducing life to participants' reactions to "clean, cold terror" (83). Yet once its moment passes, combat brings out results that are anything but clear or isolated. On the morning that follows a horrific scene in which a tiger half-consumes a rifleman on overnight ambush, Mellas see that when the company moves out, "The entire history of their stay [ . . . ] had been swallowed so totally that his memories seemed to be of dreams, not reality. The company left no more mark on the jungle than a ship's wake on the sea" (162). The results of combat may at once bring total closure on a local level—as when a Marine shoots a North Vietnamese Army soldier and reports that he "saw his fucking face disappear" (174)—and the absence of any kind of closure on a level that would transcend the local. It is the inability to fold the experiential truths of combat into an overarching and depersonalized grand narrative, then, that *Matterhorn* is foregrounding here, and which all effective naturalist war literature foregrounds. Furthermore, it is precisely in its capacity to make readers understand this disjunction that we can locate the central utility of *Matterhorn*, as well as the literary tradition it extends.

More than via any other factor, it is through its examination of race that *Matterhorn* sets about extending this tradition. By immersing itself in the racial tension that pervaded Americans' experience of the Vietnam War, *Matterhorn* applies its ironic treatment of the attempted modernization of Vietnam to U.S. domestic politics. Or, perhaps more accurately, *Matterhorn* shows readers that the limits of modernization must be met everywhere. Marines carry the imprints of racism—historical, cultural, economic, and so forth—with them to Vietnam; likewise, as the war exerts its dehumanizing pressure on them, reducing Marines to the human-as-animal, characters and readers see that these Marines will be carrying Vietnam home. We meet China, a young, black rifleman whose large-scale hopes for social transformation—hopes influenced by Malcolm X, the Black Panthers, and the Nation of Islam—propel him to begin a weapons-smuggling operation. Yet this operation is exposed as an amateur scheme, a misapplication of the macro to the micro, much like the war China is fighting. We meet another young, black rifleman named Parker, who attempts to assert his humanity to his racist sergeant only to be publically humiliated and eventually die of cerebral malaria in the field. What Marlantes is doing by conflating the strife that is war with the strife that is racial unrest, is not just undermining modernization; rather, he is undermining the idealism that so readily attaches itself to modern projects, be they the Great Society or regime change in Iraq. In other words, Marlantes is no nihilist; he is a realist, however, whose novel stands as a ferocious argument in favor of a disciplined approach to social change, an approach rooted in a hard-won understanding of the

tragic and contingent nature of historical progress. Inasmuch, *Matterhorn* both realizes and thrusts itself against the divisiveness caused by difference, whether this divisiveness is reinforced by uniform patches or skin colors. The novel both acknowledges and undermines the truths Jackson, a black rifleman who performs heroically in combat, states to Mellas in the following passage, having been asked by the latter to explain racial intolerance:

“No way, Lieutenant.” Jackson folded his arms. “You think someone’s going to understand how you feel about being in the bush? I mean, even if they’re like you in every way, you really think they’re going to understand what it’s like out here? Really understand?”

“Probably not.”

“Well, it’s like that being black. Unless you’ve been there, ain’t no way.” (429).

Hence, we learn that “*Semper Fi*,” in real terms, means for Mellas that, “People he loved were going to die to give meaning and life to what he’d always thought of as meaningless words in a dead language” (324). We learn further that this is as true of the Civil Rights Era as the Vietnam Era; we learn that these are the same era.

This pointed argument Marlantes has crafted closes in what strikes me as perfect fashion, with a terribly bloody assault in which Marines retake several times ground they previously abandoned to the NVA and which they soon will abandon again. In a passage filtered through Mellas’ consciousness, we read the following:

It was all absurd, without reason or meaning. People who didn’t even know each other were going to kill each other over a hill none of them cared about. [ . . . ] Mellas shivered. He couldn’t figure out why they didn’t just quit. Yet they wouldn’t. (343)

Over the course of the assault, Mellas and readers will discover the answer to this question. Not only do the Marines not quit, but rather each Marine, including Mellas, “gave himself over completely to the god of war within him” (351). Marlantes will describe what follows in precise and awful detail, part novelist, part surgeon for most of the text’s remaining pages. The net effects of this are multiple. First, readers

confront a simulacrum of battle sufficiently convincing as to engender nausea; given as much, readers cannot close *Matterhorn* without equating limited war with eviscerated bodies, a far cry from the sanitized reactions mass-media coverage of today's wars are likely to foster, regardless of whether we are discussing Fox's jingoism or Comedy Central's self-aggrandizing cynicism. In addition, readers find that like all agent-victims of modernization, these Marines, as well as their NVA antagonists, fight a war that already is underway. Therefore, confronting the future means turning toward it prepared to put one foot in front of the other and make what may be grave sacrifices. As Marlantes writes, Mellas finds that,

he had participated in evil [. . . but] his participation in evil was a result of his being human. Being human was the best he could do. Without man there would be no evil. But there was also no good, nothing moral built over a world of fact. (500)

In *Matterhorn*, history is both something from which one can learn and something from which one cannot escape. Decisions are less theoretical than they are situational—in Mellas' case, he is duty-bound to assist the young people under his command—and decisions always must be judged in terms of their effects on human animals. These are the lessons to be gleaned from the naturalist war text, and they remain as valid today as they were when Crane called Henry Fleming into being. Hence, by the end of the *Matterhorn*, Mellas nearly has lost an eye in combat, but also has learned to see, his injury not a diminishment of sight, but instead a means of gaining perspective through a narrowing of focus.

## Notes

1. A portion of this essay appears in Ty Hawkins' recently released book, *Reading Vietnam Amid the War on Terror* (Palgrave Macmillan 2012). Materials from the book are printed here with Palgrave's permission.
2. As Jameson clarifies, the "language of the existential individual already possesses an elaborate history with all kinds of stereotypes that it can be the task of representation to correct, disrupt, undermine, or metaphysically challenge" (1547). He contrasts these efforts to those which might aim to represent the "collective" experience of warfare, which he contends may not be open to representation (Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* [1975] and Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* [1961] standing as key counterarguments to such a claim). Jameson writes, "Group, nation, clan, class, general will, multitude—all these remain so many linguistic experiments for designating an unimaginable collective totality, a manifold of consciousness as unimaginable as it is real" (1547).

3. Sebastian Junger's glowing review for *The New York Times* is good example. Junger writes that *Matterhorn* embodies the interests of "a man whose life was radically altered by war, and who now wants to pass along the favor. Chapter after chapter, battle after battle, Marlantes pushes you through what may be one of the most profound and devastating novels ever to come out of Vietnam—or any war. It's not a book so much as a deployment, and you will not return unaltered." My argument below reflects basic agreement with and admiration for Junger's reading.
4. Philip K. Jason's comments on this score are instructive as well. In reference to postmodern works such as those of Tim O'Brien, Jason writes that "the abandonment of clock-time structures for more experiential renditions of 'what happened' brings us fictional constructions that seem more capable of recreating the absurd and grotesque awareness" Vietnam War literature "needs to share" (19). I will claim below that while there is much to value in postmodern works such as those of O'Brien, the idea that non-mimetic literatures are better able to convey war's absurdity is fallacious. There is more than one way to skin this cat, and the naturalist approach remains valid.
5. And here we confront one of the many ironies relevant to scholarly treatment of the Vietnam War and its U.S.-based literatures. The assumption that an aesthetic should embody the nature of its historical referent is a modernist idea. We see here the privileging of what Yvor Winters called "imitative form," which he identified and criticized as at work in writers such as Joyce. See Yvor Winters, *In Defense of Reason* (Denver: The U of Denver P, 1947).
6. For a fascinating reading of the helicopter—specifically, the Huey—as both the central image and central reality of the Vietnam War, see Philip Beidler, "The Last Huey," *The Vietnam War and Postmodernity*, Ed. Michael Bibby (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1999), 3-16.
7. I elaborate on my reading of Herr's *Dispatches* elsewhere. See "Violent Death as Essential Truth in *Dispatches*: Re-reading Michael Herr's 'secret history' of the Vietnam War," *War, Literature & the Arts* 21 (2009): 129-43.
8. I write here of pre-Civil War settlement efforts, or those that arose prior to the Civil War's cementing of "United States" into a singular noun.
9. If Sarah Cole is correct in identifying two central threads in Western thinking about violence—one that sees violence as generative of civilization, the other seeing violence as a diminishment thereof—then naturalism would situate itself largely on the side of the second line of exploration (1632). Largely, that is, but not entirely. In naturalism, we find an urge to couple the truth that sometimes violence is necessary to the equally important truth that war, especially in the modern age, always is a form of barbarism.
10. Gray is drawing upon the earlier work of James Reston, Jr., here. See *Sherman's March and Vietnam* (New York: Macmillan, 1984).
11. The notion that societies and war "evolve" in some way or another—a modernist conceit—remains so widespread as to appear nearly implacable. A good example of what I mean arrives in the recent work of Bill Brown, who in the midst of a cogent argument as to the need to see warfare as an interaction between people and objects contends that "our new century will come to witness war unmanned" (1788). I have heard television's talking heads, as well as academic friends of mine, make similar statements, which leads me to these questions: What war, in all of human history, has been fought "unmanned"? Further, what war today could be won or lost in a state of "unmanned" fighting? There is no evidence whatsoever that any nation could win an "unmanned" war today or tomorrow, although the potential to conduct an act of war in an unmanned or nearly unmanned fashion is a longstanding paradigm.

12. Readers intrigued by the arguments Best and Kellner advance here also should see Douglas Kellner, "From Vietnam to the Gulf: Postmodern Wars?," *The Vietnam War and Postmodernity*, Ed. Michael Bibby (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1999), 199-236.
13. Ricks' reading here gives legs to an earlier argument authored by Michael P. Clark to the effect that the failure of American technowar in Vietnam, rather than ushering in suspicion toward technowar itself, brought about an ambivalent relationship to this phenomenon. As Clark writes, after the Vietnam War ended there emerged, even among veterans of the conflict, "a very real faith in a transformative technology that can turn the memory of Vietnam, represented by the figure of the veteran, into the perfect war machine [ . . . ]" (39). Hence "Shock and Awe," to be followed by "Mission Accomplished," to be followed by years of urban guerilla fighting and the re-learning of the lesson that war is about bodies and machines, not one or the other. For Cynthia Fuchs, this would seem evidence that, "Without the certainty averred by fixed memories or identities, the 'empire' can only continue to produce and consume itself" (52). Or, as Gray writes, this is evidence of how war goes on "feeding upon dead and maimed bodies. To deny this is just to ask for a return of what it is that is repressed—the bloody reality of war" (9).
14. More precisely, he might well have written the following passage, which arrives in John M. Del Vecchio's largely forgotten Vietnam War novel, *The 13<sup>th</sup> Valley* (1982): "Beneath the flying marvels of modern warfare a transformation subtly seeped from soldier to soldier about the hilltop. [ . . . ] Alpha reverted, returned to the most traditional soldier life form, the walking marching humping hunting legions, the infantry. Airmobility brought them [ . . . ] but from there they would go on foot" (155).
15. This tripartite structure that concerns Fussell is quite similar to what Bernard E. Rollin calls "The Frankenstein Syndrome" in his critique of genetic engineering. See *The Frankenstein Syndrome: Ethical and Social Issues in the Genetic Engineering of Animals* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995).

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