"TIME IS ON MY SIDE":

Time, Masculinity, and Trauma in Michael Herr's *Dispatches*

Master's Research Project

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Abstract

This paper will examine Michael Herr's novelization of his time as a war correspondent in the Vietnam War. Specifically, I will be looking at the Marines' problematic masculinity in the face of a nostalgic pressure to conform to an American masculine ideal of the soldier archetype. By reading the novel through Svetlana Boym's theories on nostalgia as well as Stephen Kern's theories on time and the soldier, I hope to delve further into the frustrated failure and emasculation the Marines experience in Herr's novel. It is my goal to show that with the this failure to assert masculinity is intrinsic to what I am calling "eccentric time."

Introduction

> *There was a map of Vietnam on the wall of my apartment in Saigon... That map was a marvel, especially now that it wasn't real anymore. For one thing, it was very old… The paper had buckled in its frame after years in the wet Saigon heat, laying a kind of veil over the countries it depicted. Vietnam was divided into its older territories of Tonkin, Annam and Cochin China, and to the west past Laos and Cambodge sat Siam, a kingdom. That's old, I'd tell visitors, that's a really old map.* (Herr 3)

In 1967, 27-year-old Michael Herr arrived in Vietnam as a war correspondent with *Esquire* magazine to cover the war. By 1977, he had strung his dispatches together in the form of a New Journalism novel: the text is disjointed, written in a raw, stream-of-consciousness style that mimics the fast-paced and confusing war. In its creation over ten years, *Dispatches* works as a diary set at once in the past, the present, and the future. The articles he wrote during the war are bookended by an introduction and a conclusion written years after his experiences. Herr looks back on his assignment in Vietnam when the influence of nostalgia, fear and anxiety toward the future, and an unstable present were part of his daily life with the United States Marine Corps.

This paper's goal is to look at the Herr and the Marines he describes through the lens of the study of time and see what it says about definitions of masculinity in Vietnam-era America. The Marines – or grunts as Herr calls them – struggle to come to terms with their mission and themselves. An invisible enemy, a non-negotiable terrain, mind-altering drugs, and protests against the mission back home all distort and confound the grunt's

definition of war. There is a disconnect between what he was raised to believe war was and what he actually experienced. The past's war story is not the present's war experience. Even the map hanging in Herr's room does not represent anything objectively accurate. The map "wasn't real anymore" and did not stand for anything except a lost past. What happens when a man's frame of reference for his duty as a soldier reveals itself to be inapplicable to his own experience? How does this affect his definition of self, and his definition of masculinity? In *Dispatches*, the Marines' experiences undermine their own masculinity. They are caught in a liminal space between their fantasies of what military masculinity should be and the traumatic reality of the Vietnam War.

This paper will take into account the distinctly American nostalgic media portrayal of war. It is these nostalgic portrayals that fuel the Marines' impossible fantasies. They were raised on glorified images of war, which were unlike those they came up against in Vietnam. Because of this disjoint between the anticipated reality and the actual, the Marines could not contend with the war: "I keep thinking of all the kids who got wiped out by seventeen years of war movies before coming to Vietnam to get wiped out for good" (Herr 209). They are "wiped out" before arriving on images that lead them to believe war will be a certain way; the reality of war wipes them out in a much more violent way. The movies inspired within their viewers a desire to perform the masculinity Hollywood actors literally performed: "somewhere all the mythic tracks intersected from the lowest John Wayne wetdream to the most aggravated soldier-poet fantasy" (Herr 20). This project will examine the "John Wayne masculinity" at work in *Dispatches* and attempt to point out its manifestations in examples within the novel that

may seem, at first glance, unrelated. For the purposes of my study, I define this type of masculinity through the work of Victor J. Seidler and R.W. Connell.

Where this project hopefully differs from other examinations of masculinity in *Dispatches* is my concentration on time's influence on the grunts. I use Svetlana Boym's definitions of "restorative" and "reflective" nostalgia to show how the grunts are incapable of escaping their past in order to assert their masculinity. In *The Future of Nostalgia*, Boym describes "restorative" nostalgia as "[manifesting] itself in total reconstructions of monuments of the past" (41). In the case of the Vietnam War, the "monuments of the past" are the representations of American soldiers and war from the two World Wars. These representations are manifest in Hollywood movies, but are also more concretely visible in the family members of the grunts themselves. While the grunts must face the influences of restorative nostalgia and come to terms with its failure, Boym's other mode, "reflective" nostalgia, also applies constant pressure and further complicates the goals of restorative nostalgia. Reflective nostalgia "lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time" (41). They cannot define their masculinity against the examples of Hollywood or their relatives, as reflective nostalgia impedes restorative nostalgia: while they attempt to be the reconstructed monuments of their past (like role models or family members), the war reduces them to ruins of men before most of them have even grown out of their youth.

However it is not only the past that applies pressure to the grunts, complicating and ultimately impeding their identifications with masculinity: the future's threatening effect produces a terrifying inability to understand oneself. Herr writes that "every American in Vietnam had his obsession with Time" (Herr 118). This "obsession" is due

to time's bizarre effect on the soldiers of the Vietnam War: they struggle to assert their masculinity against their anxiety about the unknowable future. Stephen Kern offers a scholarly framework about the experience of time during war. He discusses anxiety toward the unknowable future in war in *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880-1918*. Kern theorizes the way in which people experience the future as a mixture of Eugene Minkowski's two modes: expectation and activity. The mode of activity is an active "driving into the [future] in control of events," while the mode of expectation is passive, "where the future comes toward the individual, who contracts against an overpowering environment" (90). Applying these modes to World War One, Kern argues that "[T]he dominant [mode] for the soldier was expectation, as the war limited his activity and sense of control over the future" (90). I apply Kern's understanding to the Vietnam War by showing that the mode of expectation for the soldiers in *Dispatches* comes as a result of a failed attempt at the mode of activity. The soldiers adopt peculiar and superstitious methods of coping in an attempt to control their future: becoming "luck freaks," meticulously monitoring the days left in their tours, and even re-enlisting. I argue that attempting to be in control of the future but eventually "contracting against an overpowering environment" emasculates the soldiers. Ultimately, it is time's eccentric effect and the anxiety toward the future that threatens their masculinity.

This complicated relationship between a crippling nostalgia and overwhelming anxiety for the future is one aspect of what I am calling eccentric time. *Dispatches* has many examples of eccentric time besides these, and I believe they point to time's influence on trauma and how it is felt, dealt with, or not dealt with. The temporality and trauma of war are closely tied. Herr writes: "The problem was that you didn't always

know what you were seeing until later, maybe years later, that a lot of it never made it in at all, it just stayed stored there in your eyes. Time and information, rock and roll, life itself, the information isn't frozen, you are" (Herr 20). At the time of Herr's experiences, he did not understand how he would feel about them years later, when those experiences become the past. As a result, he is "frozen" and unable to experience or articulate his own being. He is stuck in a liminal space between experiencing life in the present and death, frozen where trauma has left him. His inability to exist in the present belies his inability to assert his self, and therefore his masculinity. This complication of time and masculinity arises in countless forms throughout the novel. Herr illustrates that it is a universal situation for the soldiers; that "every American in Vietnam had his obsession with Time" (Herr 118). I have chosen to focus on a few different aspects of the novel in order to illustrate my idea of the relationship between time and masculinity.

The first chapter will introduce and examine the themes of nostalgia in *Dispatches* through Svetlana Boym's analysis. These themes will come up again in later chapters. It will look at the examples of and pressure from earlier generations on the Marines in the Vietnam War and show how the examples of masculinity are impossible to reconstruct in the grunts' lives. The second chapter will look at the grunts' anxiety toward the future. Unable to understand their masculinity in the present because of failed models from the past, many grunts become obsessed with time and attempt to control their future in another effort to assert their own masculinity. The third chapter will look at a broader idea of nostalgia by examining the Frontier Myth's repetition in the Vietnam War in general. The ecological devastation in Vietnam and the dominance over the land itself (as well as the people) is, I will argue, another attempt at asserting masculinity. This attempt

is entrenched in a nostalgic view of America's exceptionalism by looking at Vietnam as a New Frontier. The fourth chapter will look at a specific passage in *Dispatches* where Herr, as the narrator, misremembers a John Wayne movie called *Fort Apache*. It will look at the importance of John Wayne roles in shaping the Marines misunderstanding of war. The final chapter will conclude by looking at some of the language Herr uses to attempt to understand the traumatic experience and its relation to time and memory.

Chapter 1:
"Vietnam Vietnam Vietnam, say again, until the word lost all its old loads of pain, pleasure, horror, guilt, nostalgia": The Past's Pressure

Nostalgic interpretations of war had a negative impact on the Marines in the Vietnam War. Because the models of "war" and "soldier" they grew up with were unlike their own experience, the Marines struggled to understand their place in history's definition of masculinity. In *Man Enough*, Victor J. Seidler writes that, "Within modernity the masculine is defined in opposition to the feminine, for we have to constantly prove as boys that we are not 'soft' or 'weak'. It is part of living out the dominant myths of masculinity and it connects to a pervasive sense that we will only be 'real men' if we have fought in battle" (43). Although Seidler applies this idea to war throughout history, it is just as true for war in the twentieth century, including Vietnam. For example, the controversy around the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. provides evidence that the viewpoint of heroic servicemen and war being a masculine domain persists. Maya Lin, the Chinese-American Yale architecture student whose design submission won the contest, drew criticism not only because her piece was untraditional, but also because she is a woman. The third runner-up, Frederick Hart, disapproved Lin's design, complaining that it was political, and did not represent the veterans themselves, but the politics of war. He said in an interview in *Unwinding the Vietnam War*:

> My position is humanist, not militarist. I'm not trying to say there was anything good or bad about the war. I researched for three years – read everything. I

> became close friends with many vets, drank with them in bars. Lin's piece is a serene exercise in contemporary art done in a vacuum with no knowledge of its subject. It's nihilistic – that's its appeal. (qtd. in Sturken 125)

As a woman, she is "positioned outside of the (male) discourse of war," and unable to relate to it, or create for it (Sturken 125). Furthermore, "Hart bases his credentials on a kind of "knowledge" strictly within the male domain – drinking with the veterans in a bar-and unavailable to Maya Lin (Sturken 125). His contribution to the memorial, sanctioned by the Veterans Board as a compromise, is the sculpture *The Three Soldiers.* Departing from Lin's minimalist and inclusive design, and returning to the classical individualism of other war monuments, the statue consists of three idealized male figures in combat gear. Despite attempting to specifically represent the men who fought in Vietnam by making each figure a discernibly different race, the statue is inherently generalizing the soldiers of Vietnam into types. These types are the glorified images of masculinity from the past with which the grunts of *Dispatches* must contend in the present.

Although gender division in the Vietnam war is easy to distinguish through the data on the genders of American soldiers in Vietnam, temporal divisions are not. Intrinsic to *Dispatches*, and war itself, is what I will be calling an eccentric time. There is no clear beginning or ending for the Vietnam War. Sources cite its start and end dates variously as being "1963-72," "1961-1975," and "1954-1975," among others (Jaques, Spector, Department of Veterans Affairs). Herr wrote in Vietnam during his assignment for *Esquire Magazine* from 1967-68. However, he did not publish *Dispatches* until 1977. He

wrote the first chapter “Breathing In” and the last chapter “Breathing Out” after his return as reflections on his time in Vietnam.

In *Dispatches*, and unlike World Wars I and II, the ending and beginning of the conflict had no importance: what mattered was when a soldier was finished his tour. Oriented principally leading up to and during the battle of Khe Sanh and the Tet Offensive, the novel takes place in 1967 and 1968 during the author’s assignment as a correspondent for *Esquire* magazine, written from Herr’s own perspective with the author himself as narrator. Despite being set during the most decisive and tactically important parts of the war, the pervading sentiment of the Marines (or grunts, as Herr often calls them) is that the importance of time was relative. Among the grunts, “No one ever talked about When-this-lousy-war-is-over. Only ‘How much time you got?’” (Herr 118). A grunt tells Herr, referring to the war, “‘Far’s I’m concerned, this one’s over the day I get home,’” showing that unlike the wars of their fathers or grandfathers, the grunts do not think of their experience in Vietnam as teleological (250). The mission’s success or failure before a grunt’s arrival and after his departure has no effect on him because of the unclear methodologies to the war. Unlike the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Gulf of Tonkin incident was a controversial reason for engaging in war. Therefore the motives behind the Vietnam War seemed less clear than those behind World War II. The Marines in Vietnam are not singing “And we won’t come back till it’s over over there” as their fathers did (Cohan). The ultimate goal for the Marines in Herr’s novel is to leave Vietnam alive, regardless of the consequences of the war itself.

This disconnect between what the generations before them experienced in war and what the Vietnam soldiers experience is a result of the eccentric past, contributing at

once to their motivations behind joining the army and their failed expectations. Herr describes in "Breathing In" that his past did not prepare him for the gravity of the war. One of his first brushes with enemy fire resulted in Herr and the troops he is accompanying having to evacuate a helicopter by jumping into "swampy water, running on their hands and knees toward the grass where it wasn't blown flat by the rotor blades" (15). He is unable to understand that his present time is a serious and dangerous situation: "After-ward, I remembered that I'd been down in the muck worrying about leeches. I guess you could say that I was refusing to accept the situation" (16).

Herr's "refusing to accept the situation" is a result of his inability to reconcile his preconceived conception of war with the reality, a problem affecting all of the soldiers. These misconceptions about war are partly attributable to Hollywood's portraiture of previous US military conflicts: the soldiers "all had [their] movie-fed war fantasies" (Herr 194). The reason for this was what R.W. Connell describes as a standard for masculinity: "masculinity is what men ought to be. This definition is often found in media studies, in discussions of exemplars such as John Wayne. Few men actually match the 'blueprint' or display the toughness and independence acted by Wayne, Bogart or Eastwood" (Connell 70). By enlisting (Marines could not be drafted) in the army and emulating the heroic and macho roles of John Wayne, they hoped to join the ranks of past war soldiers and become part of the "few men" who met the standard of masculinity. Susan Jeffords, in *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War*, describes a soldier's experience in war as a "transition from outsider to member, from individual experience to history" (27). This identifying with history by asserting oneself

as a member of a masculine historical type (in this case, the soldier) speaks to the pressure to conform to a historical masculine ideal.

For that reason, the Marines in *Dispatches* have expectations about the war which are rooted in the past. In director Coco Schrijber's documentary *First Kill*, Michael Herr explains the disconnect between what a man is expecting to happen in his future as a soldier and what actually comes to pass:

> Young men are expected to go, and fight, and die. And with young men, it's interesting, it's one of the great clichés of war literature. A young man full of piss and vinegar ready to get into combat and prove his gallantry and courage and make his family proud and his community proud and they go and see what it is and it's too late.

There is a divide between the anticipated experience and reality. However, this cliché is not part of the standard of masculinity where men will "only be 'real men' if [they] have fought in battle," as the important part for the American psyche is that war and the military are patriotic and necessary parts of life. Indeed, Hollywood's ability to influence men with John Wayne roles is predicated on a patriotism and love regarding war. Danny Kaye and Bing Crosby sing, "Gee, I Wish I was Back in the Army" in the 1954 film *White Christmas* to their battalion from WWII at their commanding officer's forced retirement (about which he is not happy). Lyrics like "There's a lot to be said of the army. A life without responsibility," and "The [USO] shows we got civilians couldn't see," make it clear that recollection of World War II army life can have a sentiment of fondness to it, nostalgically favouring the perks of being a soldier over "tough civilian life" – a life of daily monotony, uninspiring work, and stasis.

In *Dispatches*, many of the grunts Michael Herr meets grew up with parents who served in previous wars (World War I, World War II, the Korean War). Their impressions of those wars were similar to the impressions Hollywood gave. Svetlana Boym, in *The Future of Nostalgia*, describes one type of nostalgia specified as "restorative" as "[manifesting] itself in total reconstructions of monuments of the past" (41). In the case of the Vietnam War, the "monuments of the past" are the representations of American soldiers and war from the two World Wars. These representations are manifest in Hollywood movies, but are also more concretely visible in the family members of the grunts themselves.

Restorative nostalgia exists in the relationship between soldiers' past and present, as they attempt to restore the example of their fathers and grandfathers in their own lives, living up to their models of masculinity. In *First Kill*, the director interviews Vietnam veteran Billy Heflin about his motivations to enlist. Billy explains:

> Well my father was a WWII veteran, and my brother was in Vietnam, and I couldn't let him outdo me. There was sort of a conflict between me and my brother about who was better at what. I had to go cause he was over. There was no way around it. I quit high school and went.

Billy's father set a model of masculinity for his progeny to live up to. Billy's brother follows the path he set and meets with positive reinforcement from the family; so, Billy feels the need to compete with his brother and assert himself as the same model of masculinity. He even says that "jealousy" toward his brother motivated his enlisting, and goes on to say that he never received any recognition from his parents until he became a soldier, while they were "always saying how proud they was (sic) of [his brother]." In an

effort to get his parents to recognize him as a person equal to his brother and father before him, he attempts to claim for himself the same masculine identity of soldier.

In *Dispatches*, Herr describes similar pressure from past generations. He quotes a grunt telling about the first mail correspondence, and really, the first acknowledgement he has ever received from his father:

> First letter I got from my old man was all about how proud he was that I'm here and how we have this *duty* to, you know, *I* don't fucking know, whatever… and it really made me feel great. Shit, my father hardly said good morning to me before. Well, I been here eight months now, and when I get home I'm gonna have all I can do to keep from killing that cocksucker… (Herr 29)

The recognition his father gives him makes him feel vindicated in his choice to go to war, and successful in his mission to become a man. However, he is unable to articulate what the "*duty*" is, despite having read it from his father's perspective in the letter. This points to the disconnect between what his father perceives as a soldier's function in society and what the grunt feels his task is in Vietnam: the grunt cannot relate to the ideal to the point of not even being able to speak it. His father's ideal is flawed because of his investment in restorative nostalgia: he understands war as a responsibility, and after eight months, no longer "full of piss and vinegar," the grunt resents his father's mislabelling of his tour in Vietnam as a dutiful one. The pressure from his family's patriarch to conform to a masculine identity and gain recognition is no longer applicable because the grunt understands that his father's restorative nostalgia cannot apply to Vietnam. Restorative nostalgia's attempt to "[totally reconstruct] monuments of the past" has failed, and the result is in a threatened masculinity (Boym 41). In an Oedipal way, the son who was

never recognized by his father as a civilian now wants to assert his dominance over the man who only respects masculinity in types. Rather than enjoy his father's newfound respect for him, he is trying to determine why he does not feel completely whole as a soldier, and sees asserting his dominance over his own model for masculinity as the only remaining option.

While the grunts must face the influences of restorative nostalgia and come to terms with its failure, Boym's other mode, reflective nostalgia, also applies constant pressure, and further complicates the goals of restorative nostalgia. Reflective nostalgia "lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time" (Boym 41). Vietnam soldier Lieutenant Dan in the movie *Forrest Gump* wishes to join his ancestral brotherhood by dying in the war and becoming a "ruin" (Boym 41). His family's military history is important to who he is as a man, and only by following his family's example can he realize his own place in history, and his own masculinity. Lieutenant Dan "was from a long, great military tradition. Somebody in his family had fought, and died, in every single American war," making it clear to Lt. Dan what his purpose for going to Vietnam would be (*Forrest Gump*). However, Forrest intervenes and changes Lt. Dan's future. Instead of letting him meet the same end as his predecessors, Forrest rescues him from certain death—although both his legs have to be amputated. Rather than being grateful for his life, Lt. Dan is resentful for missing his chance to die as his ancestors did, which he believes was his fate: "You listen to me: we all have a destiny. Nothing just happens, it's all part of a plan! I should have died out there with my men, but now I'm nothing but a goddamn cripple, a legless freak!" Lt. Dan believes he was destined to die "out there with [his] men," in keeping with his ancestral

line. Now he is neither member of his family's tradition, nor one of his men. He feels emasculated as a cripple and survivor, because death in Vietnam was supposed to solidify his place among the ruins of fallen men.

Reflective nostalgia "cherishes shattered fragments of memory and temporalizes space," and "lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history" (Boym 49, 41). The passage of time is necessary to reduce the memories to ruins, and the case is the same for Vietnam nostalgia: "After enough time passed and memory receded and settled, the name itself became a prayer, coded like all prayer to go past the extremes of petition and gratitude: 'Vietnam Vietnam Vietnam, say again, until the word lost all its old loads of pain, pleasure, horror, guilt, nostalgia'" (Herr 56). These ruins eventually lose all meaning in our world, existing only "in the dreams of another place and another time" (Boym 41). Herr describes the difference between remembering feelings and having feelings, and establishes the disconnect between the past and present:

> This is already a long time ago, I can remember the feelings but I can't still have them. A common prayer for the overattached: You'll let it go sooner or later, why not do it now? Memory print, voices and faces, stories like a filament through a piece of time, so attached to the experience that nothing moved and nothing went away." (Herr 29)

Despite time's erosive effect on the persistence of memory, "nothing went away." These remnants are the pieces which make up reflective nostalgia, the ruins and artefacts of "the imperfect process of memory" (Boym 41).

The imperfect process threatens to destroy memories altogether over time. Herr describes the lack of recognition for military losses by the upper echelons of the army: "If

they could not hear their own dead from Con Thien, only three months past, how could they ever be expected to hear the dead from Dien Bien Phu?" (Herr 106). The dead are haunting, but no one is paying attention. Like the dead casualties, Vietnam itself has become a ruin.

> *There was a map of Vietnam on the wall of my apartment in Saigon... That map was a marvel, especially now that it wasn't real anymore. For one thing, it was very old… The paper had buckled in its frame after years in the wet Saigon heat, laying a kind of veil over the countries it depicted. Vietnam was divided into its older territories of Tonkin, Annam and Cochin China, and to the west past Laos and Cambodge sat Siam, a kingdom. That's old, I'd tell visitors, that's a really old map.* (Herr 3)

As the geographical lines of the country change with war, this map stops being "real." It is "very old," and now serves only as a ruin of what the country once was. It "[reveals] decay," and serves as a "meditation on history and the passage of time" (Boym 49).

The soldiers, too, serve as examples of the passage of eccentric time – time which passes much quicker than time, by definition, does. The grunts are "serious beyond what you'd call their years if you didn't know for yourself what the minutes and hours of those years were made up of," and Herr does not know how to feel when "a nineteen-year-old kid tells [him] from the bottom of his heart that he's gotten too old for this kind of shit" (Herr 15). War's ability to speed aging is not only a problem in the Vietnam war, but war in general. Soldiers eyes are disconnected from the rest of their bodies, showing age inconsistent with their dog tags: "If you take one of those platoon photographs from the Civil War and cover everything but the eyes, there is no difference between a man of fifty

and a boy of thirteen" (Herr 87). The war causes soldiers to age prematurely and maps to become obsolete, reducing both to ruins.

Ruins can be completely obliterated when time causes them to be forgotten. Herr describes how grunts he knew during operations would approach him while they were on R&R at China Beach, "and sometimes the sight of what the war had done to them was awful" (165). They "always brought bad news" of what had gone on in their companies since Herr had departed. Here, the narrator asks the grunts about Jim Mayhew, a grunt he knew, except he cannot remember Mayhew's name:

> I couldn't remember the name of the one grunt I most wanted to hear about, I was probably afraid of what they'd say, but I described him. "He was a little cat with blond hair, and he was trying to grow a mustache… The guy I mean extended back in March, A crazy, funny little guy." They looked at each other, and I was sorry I'd asked. (Herr 165)

It had only been a few months since Herr knew Mayhew, and only a few dozen pages since the reader knew him, too. Herr is able to describe him, citing his childish attempt at facial hair, and immediately the soldiers know who he means: "He got killed," one of them says, but he also "can't remember the little fucker's name" (165). The grunts continue to try to remember his name, a task made difficult because they cannot be sure "which one" is which casualty, they are so numerous (165). As they continue with their game, Herr "has already remembered it now," but says nothing (166). Unfortunately, Mayhew's name is not important. The grunts cannot remember it because they are witness to so many deaths just like Mayhew's, and many of the grunts fit his childish

description. The difficulty of remembering is because Mayhew is not "real" anymore—only a faded memory.

While Jim Mayhew is still "real," and as soon as Herr introduces the character, the eccentric nature of time confuses the reader. She or he questions Mayhew's age from the outset, as soon as the narrator hears him singing the Oscar Mayer wiener song (115). This is evocative of the closing scene of *Full Metal Jacket*, a film by Stanley Kubrick for which Michael Herr co-wrote the screenplay. There, the Marines leave a fiery, bombed-out village singing the theme from *The Mickey Mouse Club House* (Kubrick). The scene juxtaposes childlike innocence with war's destructive violence, highlighting the youth of the soldiers charged with inflicting the devastation. This contrast between childhood and violent behaviour is present in Mayhew, too. The narrator eventually reveals that Mayhew is "young, nineteen," but initially he describes him as an even younger child: "if I'd seen him first from the back I would have said that he was eleven years old. The Marines must have a height requirement; whatever it is, I don't see how he made it. Age is one thing, but how do you lie about your height?" (116, 115). Age is something that one can lie about in order to serve in the war, making age illusory and insignificant; however, Mayhew's visible physical traits belie his youth. Other than his telling height, Mayhew "was trying to grow a mustache. His only luck with it so far was a few sparse, transparent blond clumps set at odd intervals across his upper lip, and you couldn't see that unless the light was right" (Herr 116). He is the image of a man-boy, caught between adolescence and manhood and unable to reconcile himself to either. Moreover, Mayhew's behaviour is consistent with that of a child. During combat, he behaves as a scared child would: is friend Day Tripper says that Mayhew "'was callin' out for [his]

momma while them fuckers was hittin' our wire'" (Herr 125). His mother sends him care packages, and she seems to be the only woman in his life: he refers to her as "my old lady" (137). Because Mayhew occupies the liminal space between man and child, he also occupies the space between the influence of the nostalgic past and anxiety toward the future.

Chapter 2:

"You'll let it go sooner or later, why not do it now?"

Anxiety Toward the Future

Stephen Kern discusses anxiety toward the unknowable future in war in *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880-1918.* The chapter titled "The Future" offers an understanding of how experiencing approaching time affects behaviour. The way in which people experience the future is theorized as a mixture of Eugene Minkowski's two modes: expectation and activity. The mode of activity is an active "driving into the [future] in control of events," while the mode of expectation is passive, "where the future comes toward the individual, who contracts against an overpowering environment" (90). Applying these modes to World War One, Kern argues that "[T]he dominant [mode] for the soldier was expectation, as the war limited his activity and sense of control over the

future" (90). Kern is writing about soldiers up to the ending of World War I, but each of these modes is also applicable to the Vietnam War. In *Dispatches,* anxiety toward approaching time results in the mode of expectation being the failed result of the mode of activity. A soldier is trained to feel in control of a situation, and, as mentioned above, enters the war under the misconception that he is prepared. This submission to an uncontrollable future is a symptom of a man's masculinity; he is not in the dominant John Wayne role, and, as a result, tries to control his future so that he can be.

In *Dispatches*, Herr capitalizes the word "time," introducing it as a character in itself: "every American in Vietnam had his obsession with Time," (Herr 118). Here, Time refers to future time: as mentioned before, they are concerned only with how much time is left in their tours. On Day Tripper's helmet, "where most guys just listed the months of their tours, he had carefully drawn a full calendar where each day served was marked off with a neat X" (Herr 116). His obsession with time is more intense than the other grunts:

> No metaphysician ever studied Time the way he did, its components and implications, its per-second per seconds, its shadings and movement. The Space-Time continuum, Time-as-Matter, Augustinian Time: all of those would have been a piece of cake to Day Tripper, whose brain cells were arranged like jewels in the finest chronometer. (Herr 118)

Day Tripper's understanding of time comes from his close monitoring of the approach of his discharge date. He attempts to control his future by calculating it precisely. This helps him believe he is exercising the mode of activity in approaching his future. However, this endeavour to control time is not always successful:

> Far up the road that skirted the TOC was a dump where they burned the gear and uniforms that nobody needed anymore. On top of the pile I saw a flak jacket so torn apart that no one would ever want it again. On the back, its owner had listed the months that he had served in Vietnam. *March, April, May* (each month written out in a tentative, spidery hand), *June, July, August, September, Octobler, Novembler, Decembler, Janurary, Feburary*, the list ending right there like a clock stopped by a bullet. (Herr 110-111)

Despite exercising a similar method to Day Tripper, the previous owner of that flak jacket was unable to control his future, and he "[contracted] against an overpowering environment" in the mode of expectation. Another failed attempt to control, or at least, befriend time, in the active mode is visible in Herr's own inherited gear: "TIME IS ON MY SIDE, already written there across the first helmet I ever wore there… the sweatband inside was seasoned up black and greasy, it was more alive now than the man who'd worn it" (Herr 21). Ironically, the helmet used in an attempt to control the future of the original soldier's life is the only thing left of him. As the months get farther away from his present time, they become even less real, in that he spells them less accurately. This speaks not only to the social class from which the Marines often came, but also to a subconscious distancing from what cannot be completely understood: the future.

Where relying on time fails, some of the characters turn to superstition to anticipate their future. "*Well, good luck*," became "the Vietnam verbal tic," and the soldiers carry charms, take "relics off of an enemy they'd killed, a little transfer of power," and designate grunts as "magic" if they survive something they should not have

(Herr 57). Superstition became the religion: "it was so far out, you couldn't blame anybody for believing anything" (Herr 57). Herr explains:

> I was no more superstitious than anyone else in Vietnam, I was very superstitious, and there were always a few who seemed so irrefutably charmed that nothing could make me picture them lying dead there; having someone like that with you on an operation could become more important than any actual considerations about what might be waiting on the ground for you." (Herr 227)

He tries to picture the future of the charmed grunts and is incapable of picturing death. This provides comfort for him, and leads him to believe that if he stays with the charmed soldiers he is in control of his future. Alternatively, Herr describes grunts who are consoled by visions of their own impending death, only because they feel they are in control by anticipating it: "No wonder everyone became a luck freak, no wonder you could wake at four in the morning some mornings and *know* that tomorrow it would finally happen, you could stop worrying about it now and just lie there, sweating in the dampest chill you ever felt" (135). Some grunts correctly read the omens: "Once or twice, when the men from Graves Registration took the personal effects from the packs and pockets of dead Marines, they found letters from home that had been delivered days before and were still unopened" (Herr 79). In spite of this, as seen in Lt. Dan's narrative, a vision of the future, whether it is in of life or death, is not a guarantee, and the soldier must still "contract against an overpowering environment."

When a grunt does approach the end of his tour, the anxiety toward the future and the obsession with time remaining is heightened to a point of madness. Now, eccentric

time will affect the modes of the future in two other ways. When a grunt is almost finished his tour, "Short-Timer Syndrome" affects him:

> No one expects much from a man when he is down to one or two weeks. He becomes a luck freak, an evil-omen collector, a diviner of every bad sign. If he has the imagination, or the experience of war, he will precognize his own death a thousand times a day, but he will always have enough left to do the one big thing, to Get Out. (Herr 91)

Here, the grunt's superstition has overtaken him, and he visualizes his future as bringing death. At once he is trying to ward off death with luck, but also accepting it as his own precognition. Each action leads him to believe that he is in control of his future, regardless of what it ends up being. And, as Herr says, he will always be able to "Get Out" of the war. Whether it is alive or dead, he understands that eventually, he will be where he wants to be. In accepting this, the grunt believes he is using the mode of activity in approaching his future.

Mayhew, too, believed he was "driving into the [future] in control of events" when he decides to extend his tour by four months. In doing so, he alters time for himself: "Mayhew took off his helmet and scratched out something written on the side. It had read *20 April and* OUTTA SIGHT!" (Herr 131). Day Tripper is "pissed off" at Mayhew's decision, and cannot understand why he would willingly extend his tour by "only four months" when the length of time is irrelevant: "Baby, four *seconds* in this whorehouse'll get you greased" (Herr 130). Day Tripper believes that Mayhew should have seen his father, "who 'got greased in Korea,'" as an example from whom he should have learned, or an omen to beware (Herr 117). Because of his anxiety about the end of

his tour, Mayhew has tried to take control: he is delaying the end of his tour in order to avoid "Short-Timer Syndrome" through the understanding that if it is his decision, he is actively approaching his future, instead of passively submitting to it. Of course, Mayhew does end up dying in Vietnam, and "contracting against [the] overpowering environment" of war.

The "overpowering environment" of war also serves to overpower the actual environment in Vietnam. The next chapter focuses on how nostalgia for the Frontier Myth had devastating consequences for the environmental future of Vietnam, and how the American soldiers' masculinity expressed in *Dispatches* played a role in the ecological devastation.

Chapter 3:
"Only we can prevent forests":
Ecocide, Masculinity, and the New Frontier

Our flag's unfurled to every breeze
From dawn to setting sun;
We have fought in every clime and place
Where we could take a gun;
In the snow of far-off Northern lands
And in sunny tropic scenes;
You will find us always on the job
The United States Marines.
–Marines' Hymn[1]

[1] http://www.marinehymnlyric.com/

In *The Wars We Took to Vietnam*, Milton J. Bates writes, "Trauma, which often induces amnesia, seems in the case of Vietnam to have induced the compulsive recollection of America's frontier experience" (1). This chapter focuses on the trauma inflicted upon Vietnam's ecological state and that trauma's link to the Marines' masculinity and the past. The Vietnam War's ecological impact on Southern Vietnam was devastating. The United States Armed Forces' use of chemical herbicides and defoliants in particular ravaged the country's life-sustaining ecosystems, affecting human and non-human inhabitants alike. The level and form of destruction was exceptional; so much so that it was the impetus for the neologism *ecocide*: "The … American destruction of Southeast Asia represents a new and unprecedented strategy, aimed not at the destruction of an enemy, his territory, a food crop or a culture but of an entire ecosystem. This is Ecocide" (Weisberg 18). Certainly the tactic of employing chemical warfare on the very ecosystem was a large part of what made the Vietnam War horrifyingly original – but in and of itself, the motivations behind it were not. The Vietnam War represented the newest chapter in the American frontier myth – wilderness that must be conquered and controlled in order to impose the American way of life. Michael Herr's *Dispatches* provides a gritty and candid insight into the mindsets of the military personnel (specifically, the Marines) whom he met in Vietnam in the late sixties. The myth of the frontier uses nostalgia to arouse within the American soldiers a feeling of dominance over their environment allowing them justification to destroy it. This tendency toward dominance over nature – evidenced in the Marines' Hymn included here as an epigraph – is tied to their complex and problematic sense of masculinity – complicated by a sense of duty owing to the frontier myth's representation in the popular media of the time – the

John Wayne masculinity. This cliché is not part of the standard of masculinity where men will "only be 'real men' if [they] have fought in battle," as the important factor for the American psyche is that war and the military are patriotic and necessarily dutiful parts of life. This is the "Foucauldian network of military power and knowledge that continually seeks to legitimize the myth of the hero" (Bibby 102). Indeed, a reverence for war as patriotic predicates Hollywood's ability to influence men with "John Wayne" roles (which will be further considered in the next chapter). But the reason these images of masculinity as warrior-like and patriotic work for the Vietnam soldier is that the war itself is framed as the next in a long line of wildernesses that need to be tamed by force. Consider Frederick Jackson's frontier hypothesis in "The Significance of the Frontier in American History:

> American development has exhibited not merely advance along a single line, but a return to primitive conditions on a continually advancing frontier line, and a new development for that area. American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character… in this advance, the frontier is the outer edge of the wave – the meeting point between savagery and civilization. (Turner 154)

Written in 1893, Turner's hypothesis is that a quality inherent to the American way of life is to constantly find and conquer new frontiers in order to civilize them and expand the American model. The frontiers, moreover, are natural ones – it is the environment that Americans conquer. Natasha Dow Schull explains, "the country's development could be

understood in terms of the frontier as the scene of a critical encounter between civilization and nature" (380). Nature is essentially uncivilized. She goes on to quote Henry G. Bugbee: "Americans have often thought of their conquering of the wilderness in terms of the development of a garden for mankind…" (qtd. in Dow Schull 380). She calls this tradition of the conquering of nature the "character of the American empire" (380). Turner corroborates, though he calls it democratic rather than imperialistic: "American democracy was born of no theorist's dream; … It came stark and strong and full of life out of the American forest, and it gained new strength each time it touched a new frontier" (qtd. in *Virgin Land* 253). Instead of coming "out" of the forest, America emerged in the forest's place by conquering it. Here, Boym's restorative nostalgia explains the need to re-establish the past's monuments to American dominance.

Movies, particularly westerns and war films such as the ones mentioned earlier starring John Wayne and Clint Eastwood, provide concrete examples of the frontier myth in "practice." What is more, these actors (and their characters, who can be difficult to separate from the actors themselves) are the same who serve as models of masculinity for the American youth of the Baby Boomer generation (the same who fought in Vietnam). The soldiers know the look of the heroes going into the frontier, prepared for battle: "Everyone else … had that wild haunted going-West look that said it was perfectly correct to be here where the fighting would be the worst" (Herr 74). The "West," or the frontier, necessitates and legitimizes the worst fighting – and these soldiers are heading straight toward it. This an example of Boym's reflective nostalgia at work: the sentiment surrounding the new West is an attempt to get back to the dreams of the past's way of life.

If American exceptionalism can be traced to conquering the natural environment of the literal frontier, and the frontier is always being reinvented as long as unconquered wildernesses exist, it follows that America's intervention in Vietnam was a new frontier expansion: "The most recent employment of the [frontier] myth has been on behalf of escalating the war in Vietnam" (Slotkin 562). The justifying qualities of the frontier myth at first helped the Vietnam War's legitimacy in the eyes of Americans. It should be noted of course that the frontier myth that made the war effort seem justifiable was the same myth that pointed at the United States' imperialist motives: "From the perspective of the United States … and in terms of our brief constitutional history, the Vietnam War might be seen as the final moment of the imperialist tendency" (Hardt 178). In fact, the implications of an "imperialistic 'new frontier'" change the meaning of "frontier" from a natural wilderness to the human "savages" who inhabit it (Hardt 246). Don Pease, in *The New American Exceptionalism*, argues that Henry Nash Smith's interpretation of Turner's frontier hypothesis in *Virgin Land* does not coalesce with the Vietnam War as a new frontier. In fact, Pease argues that the Vietnam War challenged the frontier hypothesis in a way that reverberated with past understandings of the expansion of the American west – mainly, its treatment of the human inhabitants:

> [T]he events that took place during the Vietnam War radically disrupted the historical effectiveness of the metanarrative of Virgin Land that had formerly endowed historical events with their intelligibility. Opponents to the War in Vietnam correlated the state's policy of Indian removal of the nineteenth century with the foreign policy that resulted in the massacres at My Lai. In so doing antiwar activists exposed the myth of Virgin Land as one of the ideological forms

through which state historians and policymakers had covered up the nation's shameful history of colonial violence. The war effected what John Hellmann has described as a radical disruption in the nation's self-representations:

> When the story of America in Vietnam turned into something unexpected, the nature of the larger story of America itself became the subject of intense cultural dispute. On the deepest level, the legacy of Vietnam is the disruption of the story of our explanation of the past and vision of the future.

(Pease 165-166)

The imperialist subjugation and removal of Native American peoples at the hands of Americans and their parallels in Vietnam are made tragically evident in this quote from John Kerry in 1971. In it he tells the story of a fellow Vietnam veteran who is Native American:

> An American Indian friend of mine who lives in the Indian Nation of Alcatraz put it to me very succinctly. He told me how as a boy on an Indian reservation he had watched television and he used to cheer the cowboys when they came in and shot the Indians. Then suddenly he stopped in Vietnam one day and said, "My God, I am doing to these people the very same thing that was done to my people." And that's what we are trying to say, that we think this thing has to end. (qtd. in Espey)

Michael Herr's *Dispatches* draws a similar comparison between the oppressive expansion of the western frontier and Vietnam. Herr as narrator explains why the task of localizing the beginning of the war in Vietnam is nearly impossible:

> Anyway you couldn't use standard methods to date the doom; might as well say that Vietnam was where the Trail of Tears was headed all along, the turnaround point where it would touch and come back to form a containing perimeter; might just as well lay it on the proto-Gringos who found the New England woods too raw and empty for their peace and filled them up with their own imported devils. (Herr 49)

Here the Vietnam War is not the "new" frontier, but the continuation of the American frontier since the arrival of the pilgrims. The frontier has always been about a conflicted relationship with the wilderness (the woods too raw and empty for their peace) and its inhabitants (the Trail of Tears and other forced relocations of Native Americans which Pease alluded to). Pease asserts that the problematics surrounding the Vietnam War's representation – the ones the anti-war activists exposed – initiated a re-thinking of the American frontier myth as a narrative of not liberation but oppression. However, from an ecocritical standpoint, this is a misreading of Turner's concept of the frontier in the first place: the nation's self-representations not as colonial imperialists expanding first into the American west and now into Vietnam but as bringers of civilization do not actually adhere to Turner's original frontier hypothesis. Nash Smith explains in *Virgin Land*, "democracy for [Turner] was related to the idea of nature and seemed to have no logical relation to civilization" (257). Therefore it seems intrinsically impossible for the myth to mean at once a civilizing of the wilderness without being imperialistic and oppressive. For it to be democratic, nature must remain in tact. Of course, the fact that it is indeed oppressive points then to an inescapable correlation between the Vietnam War as frontier and the conquering of nature.

Thus the myth of the frontier, as an American trope of dominating nature, is very useful for discussing *Dispatches*. Regarding Graham Green's *The Quiet American*, William V. Spanos writes that by "invoking the myth of American exceptionalism, indeed, its origins in the Puritans' divinely ordained 'errand in the wilderness,' Greene anticipates – perhaps is the source of – Michael Herr's brilliant genealogy of America's exceptionalist problematic, its intervention in Vietnam, and its conduct of the war" (Spanos 274). In *Dispatches*, the frontier is constantly redefined based on American positions and their "errands into the wilderness": "Prayers in the Delta, prayers in the Highlands, prayers in the Marine bunkers of the 'frontier' facing the DMZ" (Herr 45). The Americans in the wilderness – the Delta, the Highlands, and the 'frontier' facing the DMZ – are praying as long as their position is wilderness. The soldiers' understanding of their surroundings is strikingly close to that of the frontiersmen of the past. The wilderness (here, the jungle) becomes itself the enemy to be feared:

> The Puritan belief that Satan dwelt in Nature could have been born here, where even on the coldest, freshest mountaintops you could smell jungle and that tension between rot and genesis that all jungles give off. It is ghost-story country, and for Americans it had been the scene of some of the war's vilest surprises. (Herr 94)

Just as the Puritans feared the wilderness because of its mysterious impenetrability, the American army fears the jungle because it is unknowable and uncontrollable. The situation is at once familiar and horrifying: "Oh that terrain! The bloody, maddening uncanniness of it!" (Herr 95). The uncanny familiarity of the Vietnam War's frontier, highlighted by the terror of it, fittingly encapsulates the conflict between the similarities and differences of this frontier and the frontier of myth. Describing some special

operatives, Herr writes, “They seemed like the saddest casualties of the Sixties, all the promise of good service on the New Frontier either gone or surviving like the vaguest salvages of a dream” (52). Here the exposure of the frontier myth not as positive democratic liberation but as oppressive violence is like a dream dissipating into reality after awakening. But the American soldiers’ belief in the myth of the frontier does not come only in the form of the wilderness. It mixes perfectly the natural world of the jungle with all of its inhabitants, including humans. The humans, in accordance with the myth, are savages; contrary to the myth, these savages cannot be figuratively separated from their wilderness – not even with the use of chemical weapons:

> We napalmed off their crops and flattened their villages, and then admired the restlessness in their spirit. Their nakedness, their painted bodies, their recalcitrance, their silent composure before strangers, their benign savagery and the sheer, awesome ugliness of them combined to make most Americans who were forced to associate with them a little uncomfortable over the long run. It would seem fitting, ordained, that they should live in the Highlands, among triple canopies, where sudden, contrary mists offered sinister bafflement, where the daily heat and the nighttime cold kept you perpetually, increasingly on edge… (Herr 94)

The chemical weapons strip the land of the wilderness, but the inhabitants remain in the Highlands that are mysterious and threatening – appropriately, because the soldiers perceive the native inhabitants as being mysterious and threatening, too.

The abuse of the wilderness is essential to the myth of the frontier: the frontier is wilderness that must be tamed by whatever means necessary. In the Vietnam War, the

American army chose to tame the frontier by obliterating it with chemical weapons. The devastation on the countryside of Southern Vietnam goes beyond any environmental damage of past frontiers, however. Rather than a scorched-earth tactic that effects only crops, or poisoning water supplies to villages, the defoliants and herbicides used in Southern Vietnam destroyed entire complex and interdependent ecosystems. At the 2002 Environmental Conference of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, the ecosystems report found the following:

> Over 72 million liters of herbicides destroyed roughly ten percent of southern Vietnam‘s valuable forests, including nearly one-third of the coastal mangroves which play vital roles in coastal ecology and in sustaining fish stocks. Toxic chemicals contained in the herbicides, arsenic and dioxin in particular, are expected to continue posing a significant health threat long into the future. Altogether, the damage to the environment was so intense and widespread that it gave rise to the term “ecocide”. Nearly three decades later, many of the affected ecosystems have still not recovered. The long-term consequences include loss of habitat and biological diversity, severe and persistent problems of public health, enormous economic losses, and severe constraints on human development. (“Long-Term Consequences of the Vietnam War”)

The herbicides and defoliants used in the military operations cause reciprocal effects throughout the Vietnamese landscape. This large-scale decimation of the natural environment is ecocide and, speaking from the perspective of the US military, served a few purposes: “Although the defoliation program began with the intention of merely destroying the economic base of the NLF, it was soon expanded into a critical aspect of

the shift from ground to air power in South Vietnam. Besides destroying crops, defoliants were used to destroy the forest canopy that hid NLF forces from detection by air" (Weisberg 18). In fact, in 1962 defoliants became a "central weapon" for the military's strategy throughout Southeast Asia:

> From January 1962 to February 1971, the USAF aerially deployed tactical herbicides in combat operations to improve visibility in enemy controlled or contested jungle areas in order to expose infiltration routes, base camps, weapon placements, and storage sites … [and] were sprayed along enemy-entrenched lines of communication, transportation routes, around the outside of base perimeters, and for limited but selectively-approved use for crop denial. (Young 3)

Herr recalls viewing the destruction from a helicopter: "I leaned out the door and looked at the endless progression of giant pits which were splashed over the ground, at the acre-sized scars where napalm or chemical spray had eaten away the cover. (There was a special Air Force outfit that flew defoliation missions. They were called the Ranch Hands, and their motto was, 'Only we can prevent forests.')" (Herr 154). The Ranch Hands flew in converted C-123 cargo planes to spray the forests. Their brazen misappropriation of Smokey the Bear's conservation motto reveals a cavalier and entitled attitude toward the destruction of the ecosystem. The sense of entitlement is rooted in the frontier myth and their understanding that as soldiers it is their duty and privilege to eat away the enemy's cover – the ecosystem of the jungle:

> We never announced a scorched-earth policy; we never announced any policy at all, apart from finding and destroying the enemy, and we proceeded in the most

> obvious way. We used what was at hand, dropping the greatest volume of explosives in the history of warfare over all the terrain within the thirty-mile sector which fanned out from Khe Sanh. Employing saturation-bombing techniques, we delivered more than 110,000 tons of bombs to those hills during the eleven-week containment of Khe Sanh. The smaller foothills were often quite literally turned inside out, the steeper of them were made faceless and drawless, and the bigger hills were left with scars and craters of such proportions that an observer from some remote culture might see in them the obsessiveness and ritual regularlity of religious symbols, the blackness at the deep center pouring out rays of bright, overturned earth all the way to the circumference; forms like Aztec sun figures, suggesting that their makers had been men who held Nature in an awesome reverence. (Herr 153)

The suggestion then turns to the military that do not hold Nature in an awesome reverence. In fact, Nature (capitalized, now a character itself) has become synonymous with the enemy – destroy one and you destroy the other. The jungle's foreboding presence becomes a stand-in for the elusive NVA: "the jungled hills […] I had the strangest, most thrilling kind of illusion there, looking at those hills and thinking about the death and mystery that was in them" (Herr 107). Further, Nature is personified as a killer that takes many forms: "Forget the Cong, the *trees* would kill you, the elephant grass grew up homicidal, the ground you were walking over possessed malignant intelligence, your whole environment was a bath" (Herr 66). However, the violent, dangerous Nature of the jungle includes the villages, too: "Because the Highlands of Vietnam are spooky, unbearably spooky, spooky beyond belief. They are a run of erratic

mountain ranges, gnarled valleys, jungled ravines and abrupt plains where Montagnard villages cluster, thin and disappear as the terrain steepens" (Herr 93). The villages within the jungles are as spooky as the jungles themselves. The inhabitants are just dangerous. The established enemy for the American Forces in Vietnam is no longer the NVA – nor is it even human: it is the jungle itself.

The frontier myth's effect on the American cultural memory motivates the US troops in Vietnam to believe that the victory in South Asia necessitates a dominion over the wilderness. Its effect is only successful because of the concurrent models of masculinity which apply such great pressure to the soldiers: the model of John Wayne as frontiersman and John Wayne as soldier. Equating the two give the soldiers the necessary justification for their actions in the war by making the decimation of nature (or Nature) a personal, gender-loaded, performative action. The accomplishments of the defoliation missions become sources of pride to the soldiers because they serve to validate their actions as not only soldiers but men:

> *"At the end of my first week in-country I met an information officer in the headquarters of the 25th Division at Cu Chi who showed me on his map and then from his chopper what they'd done to the Ho Bo Woods, the vanished Ho Bo Woods, taken off by giant Rome plows and chemicals and long, slow fire, wasting hundreds of acres of cultivated plantation and wild forest alike, 'denying the enemy valuable resources and cover.' It had been part of his job for nearly a year now to tell people about that operation … It seemed to be keeping him young, his enthusiasm made you feel that even the letters he wrote home to his wife were full of it, it really showed what you could do if you had the know-how and the*

> *hardware. And if in the months following that operation incidences of enemy activity in the larger area of War Zone C had increased 'significantly,' and American losses had doubled and then doubled again, none of it was happening in any damn Ho Bo Woods, you'd better believe it…"*
>
> (Herr 4)

The soldier is enthusiastically proud of the success of the mission to destroy the Ho Bo Woods, despite the fact that in the larger picture, the American troops could still suffer. This shows that the destruction of the Woods is the genuine goal – its possible implications for a safer war would just be an advantage. Here Michel Foucault's biopolitics serve to highlight the parallel between the jungle and the Vietnamese who inhabit it. As he writes in *Society Must be Defended*, "The fact that the other dies does not mean simply that I live in the sense that his death guarantees my safety; the death of the other, the death of the bad race, of the inferior race (or the degenerate, or the abnormal) is something that will make life in general healthier: healthier and purer" (255). The vanished Ho Bo Woods have not made anyone safer per se, but the eradication of the race of the Vietnamese (which always means the jungle and its inhabitants) make the world a "healthier and purer" place. In fact, the wide-angled, indiscriminate spray of the herbicides affect the ecosystem and what Foucault calls "man-as-species:" "Unlike discipline, which is addressed to bodies, the new nondisciplinary power is applied not to man-as-body but to the living man, as man-as-living-being; ultimately, if you like, to man-as-species" (Foucault 242). As a species within the ecosystem of Vietnam's jungle, the American military eliminates humans along with their co-dependent environment.

Furthermore, this ecological population control also serves to strengthen masculinity, because now the American soldier dominates both man and nature as one. Herr as narrator speculates that the bravado with which the Ho Bo Woods information officer explains the levelling of the Woods extends to his wife, implying that it reinforces his masculinity. He and the other soldiers must constantly affirm their masculinity because it is continually under threat. In order to do this, the soldiers point their aggression toward their catch-all enemy: Nature:

> But mostly, I think, the Marines hated those hills; not from time to time, the way many of us hated them, but constantly, like a curse. Better to fight the war in the jungles or along the dry flats that lined the Cua Viet River than in those hills. I heard a grunt call them 'angry' once, probably something he'd picked up from a movie or a television series, but from his point of view he was right, the word was a good one. So when we decimated them, broke them, burned parts of them so that nothing would ever live on them again, it must have given a lot of Marines a good feeling, an intimation of power. They had humped those hills until their legs were in agony, they'd been ambushed in them and blown apart on their trails, trapped on their barren ridges, lain under fire clutching the foliage that grew on them, wept alone in fear and exhaustion and shame just knowing the kind of terror that night always brought to them, and now, in April, something like revenge had been achieved. (Herr 152-153)

The discursive atmosphere the soldiers use to frame their experience comes from the American media from which they draw their models of masculinity. The destruction of the land to the point of no return gives them a feeling of power. The land emasculates and

shames them when they weep, and they achieve revenge – and reinforce their masculinity – when they destroy it. Moreover, the jungle is personified to the point where it becomes gendered: "'Aw, jungle's okay. If you know her you can live in her real good, if you don't she'll take you down in an hour. Under'" (Herr 10). The feminized jungle is threatening the soldier – the model of masculinity. Now the language surrounding the defoliation missions themselves take a sexist connotation: the chemical spray from the Ranch Hands as symbolic ejaculate on the virgin jungle; the discourse of "raping" a land; "penetrate that abiding Highland face" (Herr 96). Indeed, the vocabulary of sexual assault on a feminized Nature follows the vocabulary of ecocide as a form of genocide on the ecosystem.

The 1979 movie *Apocalypse Now* (based on a screenplay written by Michael Herr) depicts the raging fires of the Vietnam War in literal realism: "For the opening shot … several acres of palm trees in the Philippines were doused with 1,200 gallons of gasoline. 'There aren't too many places in the world you could do it,' said Coppola. 'They'd never let you in the US; the environmentalists would kill you'" (Billson). Of course this is true: such wanton destruction for the sake of a movie, despite it being only a small fraction of the reality the movie depicts, is outrageous. Even so, Coppola justifies his choice in the name of telling the story. However, his choice of words – "the environmentalists would kill you" – is an interesting one. In the Vietnam War and in *Dispatches*, the American military commit ecocide on the Vietnamese landscape as a Foucauldian war act that reinforces their models of masculinity, which in turn are based on the frontier myth. By completely disregarding the Vietnamese as people in order to obliterate them as part of an ecosystem, the American soldiers simultaneously assert their

masculinity and disavow responsibility to the race as people – rather than as a species in a disposable ecosystem.

Chapter 4:

"Life-as-movie, war-as-(war)-movie, war-as-life": Nostalgic Misinterpretations of John Wayne Masculinity and the Hollywood Soldier

I am the living death
the memorial day on wheels
I am your yankee doodle dandy
your john wayne come home
your fourth of july firecracker
exploding in the grave

-*Born on the Fourth of July* by Ron Kovic

In the above passage, Ron Kovic writes that as an American veteran of the Vietnam Conflict he is John Wayne "come home." Kovic was paralyzed in Vietnam, so his return "on wheels" is a painful one. In Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, the characters of the Marines in Vietnam deal with a different type of painful homecoming; however, for them the maladjustment comes not after their arrival back stateside, but in Vietnam itself.

Their painful homecoming is a complicated nostalgia built upon images of Hollywood with which they were raise and wherein John Wayne plays the central part. Two of his movies mentioned in *Dispatches* give examples of Boym's modes of nostalgia: *Fort Apache* is restorative while *The Green Berets* is reflective. This chapter does not seek to evaluate the post-Vietnam influence of Hollywood or its interpretation of the war – nor does it intend to look at the state of American film during the conflict itself outside of *The Green Berets*. The point of this chapter is to examine the nostalgic pressure of Hollywood masculine heroics that characters in *Dispatches* exhibit. And as Ron Kovic illustrates, the ubiquitous household name of those heroics is John Wayne.

In *Man Enough,* Victor J. Seidler writes that, "Within modernity the masculine is defined in opposition to the feminine, for we have to constantly prove as boys that we are not 'soft' or 'weak'. It is part of living out the dominant myths of masculinity and it connects to a pervasive sense that we will only be 'real men' if we have fought in battle" (43). Although Seidler applies this idea to war throughout history, it is just as true for war in the twentieth century, including Vietnam. In fact, Leo Braudy emphasizes modern warfare's "technologically advanced style" as necessitating the "imaginative persuasiveness" of a "John Wayne style of heroism" (521). He continues:

> Which then comes first – war or masculinity? Without the invocation of masculine honor, would any more than a small proportion of the population be willing to fight as soldiers? … Wars consume resources, but they also consume men, and they feed especially on the idea that men naturally go to war – an idea that enshrines a masculine heroism that will inspire men to go to future wars. (521)

Seidler and Braudy concern themselves with the chicken-and-egg conundrum of where the association of masculinity with war originated – what Braudy calls a "John Wayne style of heroism." However, its origin is not the important point when considering *Dispatches*; simply put, an association between the two exists, and what I am interested in is the ways in which the association has permeated the lives of the Marines in the novel – how the "John Wayne style of heroism" is important to them. In *The Warriors,* J. G. Gray offers an explanation for this permeation: "Millions of men in our day – like millions before us – have learned to live in war's strange element and have discovered in it a powerful fascination. The emotional environment of warfare has always been compelling; it has drawn most men under its spell" (28). The "spell," according to Gray, results from three basic appeals: "the delight in comradeship, the delight in seeing, and the delight in destruction" (28). These appeals (and therefore the "spell" itself) derive from a nostalgic ideal of masculinity manifest in The Soldier as archetype. These archetypes are the delight of seeing – the image of masculinity from the past with which the grunts of *Dispatches* must contend in the present – and "[t]hough Wayne never served in the military, General Douglas MacArthur thought he was the model of an American soldier" (Wills 12). For those watching John Wayne on screen, seeing was as good as believing that he was the model of an American soldier.

That American soldier's experience in Vietnam differed greatly and in numerous ways from his experience in previous American conflicts. A framework of the differences that come forth in *Dispatches* (but that is perhaps less widely examined as others) is that of temporality. Unlike World Wars I and II, the ending and beginning of the actual conflict had no importance to the American soldier in Vietnam: what mattered was when

he was finished his tour. Oriented principally leading up to and during the battle of Khe Sanh and the Tet Offensive, the novel takes place in 1967 and 1968 during the author's assignment as a correspondent for *Esquire* magazine, written from Herr's own perspective with the author himself as narrator. Despite being set during the most decisive and tactically important parts of the war, the pervading sentiment of the Marines (or grunts, as Herr often calls them) is that the importance of time – actually, time itself – was relative. Among the grunts, "No one ever talked about When-this-lousy-war-is-over. Only 'How much time you got?'" (Herr 118). A grunt tells Herr, referring to the war, "'Far's I'm concerned, this one's over the day I get home'" (250). Unlike the wars of their fathers or grandfathers, the grunts do not think of their experience in Vietnam as teleological. The mission's success or failure before a grunt's arrival and after his departure has no effect on him; he is not singing "And we won't come back till it's over over there" as their grandfathers did (Cohan). The ultimate goal is to leave Vietnam alive, regardless of the consequences of the war itself.

This disconnect between what the generations before them experienced in war and what the Vietnam soldiers experience is a result of the eccentric past: a past that seems to have no bearing on the present in that it is so different, but is directly responsible for the differences. The influence of the representations of the soldier of the past contributes at once to the Vietnam War soldier's motivations behind joining the army and his failed expectations. Herr describes in the chapter "Breathing In" that his past did not prepare him for gravity of the war. "Breathing In" evokes a preparatory action where one not only summons a necessary substance for a planned action but also indiscriminately takes in all that is around him. What follows then is that the background

of motivations and influences of the soldiers in Vietnam were at once intentionally preparatory and necessarily influenced by that on which they were drawing. Ultimately, these sources of influence about what it means to be a man at war – what they are "breathing in" – are misconceptions conceived in Hollywood. The soldiers "all had [their] movie-fed war fantasies," misrepresentations of war from movies with which they grew up (Herr 194). Westerns and World War II movies painted a war unlike the one in Vietnam, and Herr can recognize the detrimental effects this background has: "I keep thinking of all the kids who got wiped out by seventeen years of war movies before coming to Vietnam to get wiped out for good" (Herr 209). These movies inspired within their viewers a need to perform the masculinity Hollywood actors literally performed: "somewhere all the mythic tracks intersected from the lowest John Wayne wetdream to the most aggravated soldier-poet fantasy" (Herr 20). The reason for this was what R.W. Connell describes as a standard for masculinity: "masculinity is what men ought to be. This definition is often found in media studies, in discussions of exemplars such as John Wayne. Few men actually match the 'blueprint' or display the toughness and independence acted by Wayne, Bogart or Eastwood" (70). By emulating the heroic and macho roles of John Wayne, soldiers of the Vietnam war hoped to join the ranks of past wars' soldiers and become part of the "few men" who met the standard of masculinity. Susan Jeffords, in *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War*, describes a soldier's experience in war as a "transition from outsider to member, from individual experience to history" (27). This identifying with history by asserting oneself as a member of a masculine historical type (in this case, the soldier) speaks to the

pressure to conform to a historical masculine ideal. Connell has already pointed to the face of the masculine ideal which Herr names in *Dispatches*: John Wayne.

In order to understand how this model of masculinity contributes to the characters' inability to "accept the situation" of the Vietnam War, a framework for the influence of the past must be considered (Herr 16). In *Dispatches*, many of the grunts Herr meets grew up with grandfathers, fathers, and brothers who served in previous wars – wars that were familiar to the American public. Their impressions of those wars were similar to (or indeed, as a result of) the impressions Hollywood gave in its movie adaptations. It is these adaptations that nostalgically influence the grunts to, in the words of Svetlana Boym, "restore" and "reflect" a masculine ideal. In her work, *The Future of Nostalgia*, she describes "restorative" nostalgia as "[manifesting] itself in total reconstructions of monuments of the past" (41). Restorative nostalgia exists in the relationship between soldiers' past and present, as they attempt to restore the example of John Wayne – the masculine ideal, the monument of the past. In *Dispatches* two of Wayne's films are mentioned – *Fort Apache* (1948) and *The Green Berets* (1968). Herr recollects *Fort Apache* and ties it to the Vietnam War:

> Mythopathic moment; *Fort Apache*, where Henry Fonda as the new colonel says to John Wayne, the old hand, "We saw some Apache as we neared the Fort," and John Wayne says, "If you saw them, sir, they weren't Apache." But this colonel is obsessed, brave like a maniac, not very bright, a West Point aristo wounded in his career and his pride, posted out to some Arizona shithole with only marginal consolation: he's a professional and this is a war, the only war we've got. So he gives the John Wayne information a pass and he and half his command get wiped

> out. More a war movie than a Western, Nam paradigm, Vietnam, not a movie, no jive cartoon either where the characters get smacked around and electrocuted and dropped from heights flattened out and frizzed black and broken like a dish, then up again and whole and back in the game, "Nobody dies," as someone said in another war movie. (46)

In her analysis of this passage, Katherine Kinney says that the "mythopathic moment" reflects "the film's overt concern with the deluding quality of myth which deforms historical experience and gets people killed" (25). I argue that in concerning itself with the dangers of defining mythic figures that influence future conflict, the film nevertheless does exactly that; the fact that Herr is recollecting it in comparison to Vietnam is evidence for this, but what is even more convincing is that Herr misremembers the film. As Kinney goes on to point out, "Near the end of *Fort Apache*, John Wayne's final speech does in fact attest to the fact that 'nobody dies' in war" (26). It is not said by "someone … in another war movie" but Wayne himself in the same role (Herr 46). Even more striking though, is that he has misremembered Fonda's line in the dialogue he quoted before. The actual scene, with Henry Fonda as Lt. Col. Owen Thursday, and John Wayne as Captain York, is as follows:

> THURSDAY
>
> We here have little chance for glory or advancement. While some of our brother officers are leading their well-publicized campaigns against the great Indian nations – the Sioux and the Cheyenne – we are asked to ward off the gnat stings and flea bites of a few cowardly digger Indians.
>
> YORK
>
> Your pardon, Colonel. You'd hardly call Apaches "digger Indians," sir.

THURSDAY

You'd scarcely compare them with the Sioux, Captain.

YORK

No, I don't. The Sioux once raided into Apache territory. Old-timers told me you could follow their line of retreat by the bones of their dead.

THURSDAY

I suggest the Apache has deteriorated since then, judging by a few of the specimens I've seen on my way out here.

YORK

Well, if you saw them, sir, they weren't Apaches.

The scene takes place in the first act of the film, when Thursday has arrived to his new post, which he obviously disdains. The two men are squaring off in front of Thursday's other new subordinates, and the difference between each of them is obvious. Thursday's appearance is formal and by the book, while York has personalized his military uniform with cowboy accessories – a practice Thursday has since forbidden. The power structure is an intriguing one to analyse. In Figure 1, York's cowboy hat (a symbol of rebelliousness against Thursday) allows him to stand above the Colonel. His weapon is visible, and his hands are in front of him, suggesting an energy, force, and violence that Thursday's countenance subdues or avoids altogether. The man in the background keeps his eye on York, despite Thursday being the one speaking at that moment. The scene occurs indoors, with no action impending; when Thursday dismisses the men a moment later, he tells them to return to breakfast. Why then, does Herr misremember the scene as being one with recent action: "We saw some Apache as we neared the fort"? His memory

of the trigger for York (though he refers to the character as the actor himself) is a line that implies a threat of impending war. In Herr's recollection of the scene, Henry Fonda's character is making a decision about imminent war, and he ignores John Wayne's input – and he pays dearly.

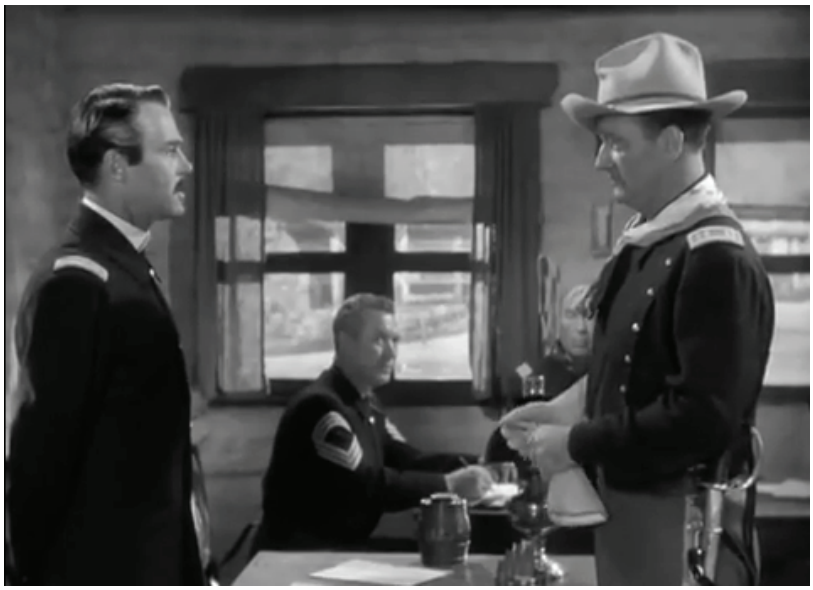

Figure 1

When Herr says "More a war movie than a Western, Nam paradigm, Vietnam, not a movie," he's drawing a comparison between the American government's involvement in Vietnam and Thursday, and saying that Vietnam is Thursday's misjudgment come true. Implicitly then he is valuing John Wayne's expertise ("the old hand"). It is important as well that Herr's recollection of the scene restructures the politics of the characters. His retelling is simply a better soldier disagreeing with his commanding officer about the abilities of the enemy and battle tactics. In the script, York is defending the Apache from Thursday's racist belittlement. He is making a case for their ability not as men who were seen by the fort, but as men who cannot be summed up as gnats, fleas, and "digger Indians." "Ironically," Michael Anderegg writes, "it is Fonda, the liberal, who portrays

the harsh, unbending, racist Custer-surrogate Owen Thursday, while Wayne plays the softer, more human and humane, near-liberal Kirby York" (18). Herr's memory ignores the fact that York's reasoning for disagreeing with Thursday comes from a liberal-minded respect for the Native American tribe and instead replaces the reasoning behind John Wayne's character with perceptive battle strategy. Here, Herr is "restoring" an ideal form of tough, war-like masculinity by misremembering the movie in order to be in line with the archetype of "simple, one-dimensional heroism: Wayne as Captain America, a hero undivided in his loyalties and emotions and indestructible in his encounters with the enemy" (Anderegg 19). Anderegg goes on to mention *Sands of Iwo Jima,* a movie often referred to in analyses of Vietnam influences, but conspicuously absent in *Dispatches*. Its absence, and Herr's erroneous focus instead on John Wayne's character in *Fort Apache*, speak directly to restorative nostalgia's attempt to "reconstruct monuments from the past" (Boym 41). The monument Herr reconstructs for himself is the masculine Wild West soldier bravado of John Wayne.

Consider now reflective nostalgia, which "cherishes shattered fragments of memory and temporalizes space," and "lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history" (Boym 49, 41). The passage of time is necessary to reduce memories to ruins, and the case is the same for Vietnam nostalgia: "After enough time passed and memory receded and settled, the name itself became a prayer, coded like all prayer to go past the extremes of petition and gratitude: Vietnam Vietnam Vietnam, say again, until the word lost all its old loads of pain, pleasure, horror, guilt, nostalgia" (Herr 56). These ruins eventually lose all meaning in our world, existing only in the dreams of another place and another time

(Boym 41). Herr describes the difference between remembering feelings and having feelings, and establishes the disconnect between the past and present:

> This is already a long time ago, I can remember the feelings but I can't still have them. A common prayer for the overattached: You'll let it go sooner or later, why not do it now? Memory print, voices and faces, stories like a filament through a piece of time, so attached to the experience that nothing moved and nothing went away. (Herr 29)

Despite time's erosive effect on the persistence of memory, "nothing went away." These remnants are the pieces that make up reflective nostalgia, the ruins and artefacts of "the imperfect process of memory" (Boym 41). Herr's erroneous recollection of *Fort Apache* is an example of memory process' imperfection, but because he did remember, just incorrectly, he restored John Wayne's masculine ideal which is alive and well in his other movies (and "popular image") and not at all a ruin to be lingered upon (Anderegg 18).

However, John Wayne lingered upon ruins in the mode of reflective nostalgia when he made and starred in *The Green Berets* (as Colonel Mike Kirby[2]). In this review of the film from *The New York Times*, Renata Adler scathes:

> "*THE GREEN BERETS*" is a film so unspeakable, so stupid, so rotten and false in every detail that it passes through being fun, through being funny, through being camp, through everything and becomes an invitation to grieve, not for our soldiers or for Vietnam (the film could not be more false or do a greater disservice to either of them) but for what has happened to the fantasy-making apparatus in this

[2] Interestingly, "Kirby" was Wayne's character's first name in *Fort Apache.*

> country. Simplicities of the right, simplicities of the left, but this one is beyond the possible. It is vile and insane. On top of that, it is dull.

Adler is an American woman whose review mercilessly criticizes one of the only movies about the Vietnam War to be made during the war itself. Though perhaps positioned outside of the realm of masculinity, by pointing at the "fantasy-making apparatus" she acknowledges the problematics of the archetypal John Wayne soldier. Michael Munn, in *John Wayne: The Man Behind the Myth,* quotes one of the directors of the film, Mervyn LeRoy:

> So Jack Warner called me and said, "Duke Wayne is making an expensive war picture for us. It's about the Vietnam War." I said, "Yeah, I know, and I have to tell you, nobody's ever made a film about the Vietnam War and I think it's risky." Jack said, "Yeah, I know. But it could be a good old-fashioned war picture but instead of the Japanese or Germans, John Wayne is fighting the North Vietnamese." I said, "Jack, there are people in this country who don't want this war." He said, "But there are still enough people in this country who'll see John Wayne in a war picture. And that's what we gotta have."

The "fantasy-making apparatus" is alive and well for Warner Brothers, and they understand that John Wayne will attract viewers in any war movie because of his association with "good old-fashioned war picture[s]." The trailer for the movie brags, "As many different kinds of courage as there are names. Colonel Mike Kirby: the pro." Kirby, or rather, John Wayne, is "the pro" – the same one that Herr remembers in *Fort Apache*. The actor is seasoned in war performances despite never having served himself. Herr

criticizes John Wayne's lack of first-hand knowledge, as well as the Hollywood World War II-feel of the movie and the obvious marketing strategies:

> In any other war, they would have made movies about us too, Dateline: Hell!, Dispatch from Dong Ha, maybe even A Scrambler to the Front, about Tim Page, Sean Flynn and Rick Merron, three young photographers who used to ride in and out of combat on Hondas. But Vietnam is awkward, everybody knows how awkward, and if people don't even want to hear about it, you know they're not going to pay money to sit there in the dark and have it brought up. (*The Green Berets* doesn't count. That wasn't really about Vietnam, it was about Santa Monica.) (Herr 188)

For Herr, the film is not just a repurposing of WWII; it is such a blatant rehashing of Hollywood's WWII film clichés that the movie is about Hollywood itself. Critics have pointed to the film's failures by explaining one of its primary concerns: the notion of seeing for oneself. In *From Hanoi to Hollywood*, Rick Berg writes:

> Colonel Kirby (John Wayne) tells Beckworth (David Janssen) on at least two occasions that one cannot really understand Vietnam or know the war until one sees it. What the film represents and teaches – for, after all, it is only a long lecture – is that the war can be seen (although what can be seen is left off the screen) and we can know nothing until we see it ourselves. Seeing is knowing. *The Green Berets* claims to tell us, then, that representations are fraudulent, even as it requires us to look at it as a representation. The film sacrifices its own validity for its belief in the primacy of experience, and ends by representing the 'failure of the fantasy-making apparatus.'" (54)

Berg is quoting Adler's review, and explains that the failure comes from the hypocritical pressure applied to seeing the Vietnam War first-hand when its creator had never seen any combat first-hand, and the movie itself only represented American war movies of the past. Here, John Wayne's project is lingering on the ruins of American combat represented in Hollywood: the WWII movies evoked in *The Green Berets* cannot be reconstructed to serve the new generation's war, and thus remain in ruin.

This imperative to see for oneself, represented by the character of the journalist in *The Green Berets*, stems from a need to seek a nostalgic reflection of one's understanding of what war is in one's current situation. Herr describes the Marines as "movie-warped" because what they see is detached from the mental image of war they linger on. For the Marines, the "patina of time and history" is more specifically a tarnished silver screen. The "dreams of another place and another time" are what the movies bring to life – but reflecting upon them only serves to emphasize their ruin-quality: they cannot be reflected in reality (Boym 41). Reflective nostalgia also "cherishes shattered fragments of memory and temporalizes space" (Boym 49). *The Green Berets* similarly cherishes the model for the "old-fashioned war picture" which, because it is a shattered fragment, cannot be reassembled for the newly temporalized space of the 1960s military arena. For the Marines in *Dispatches*, seeing for oneself in the "Life-as-movie, war-as-(war)-movie, war-as-life" reality in Vietnam opposes the "dreams of another place and another time" that the old-fashioned war movies provide (Herr 65, Boym 41). Consider the theatrical posters for *The Green Berets* and *Fort Apache* (Figure 2). Though twenty years apart, these posters have a lot in common visually. Each poster's top half is dominated by an artist's rendering of battle: violent, chaotic, and stylized. *The Green Berets*' poster has a

less obvious enemy than *Fort Apache*, which is ironic considering the former movie's attempt to delineate a clear reason for being in Vietnam, while the latter's concerns the elusiveness and stealth of the Apache. *The Green Berets*' poster also differs in the second half in that it shows graphic representations of the top billed actors. Presumably this is to take advantage of John Wayne's notoriety (just as Jack Warner knew he had to and could in order to sell movie tickets). Finally the most obvious difference between the two posters is *The Green Berets*' use of a tagline. It reads: "So you don't believe in glory. And heroes are out of style. And they don't blow bugles anymore. So take another look – at the special forces in a special kind of hell[.]

It is clear by the tagline that *The Green Berets*' purpose as a movie is to sway what it sees as a hostile opinion on the war in Vietnam. Despite addressing that its audience does not believe in glory, the film was criticized as glorifying war. However it was a box office success, adhering to the hypothesis the studio had for John Wayne's power to attract viewers because of what he represents: the "fantasy-making apparatus" and the "delight in seeing" coalescing in his mythic figure.

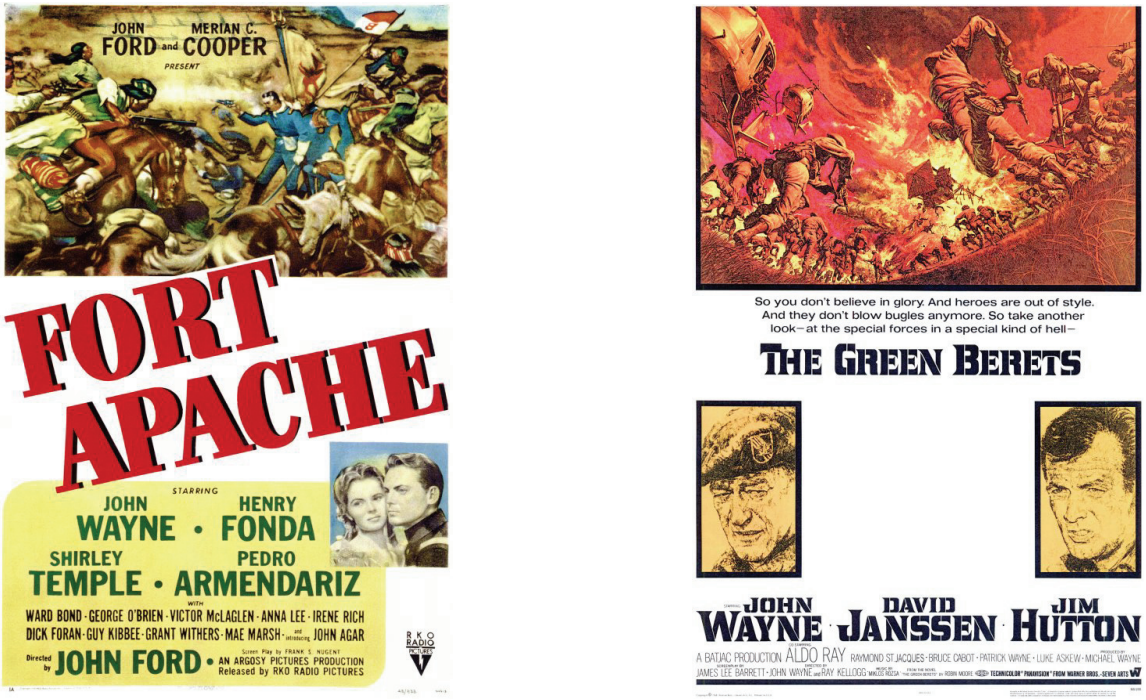

Figure 2

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Herr elaborates on the "movie-fed war fantasies" he describes in *Dispatches* in Coco Schrijber's documentary *First Kill*. In an interview, Herr says people constantly tell him they wish they had been in Vietnam to see for themselves. Schrijber asks, "What did they really envy you for?" He replies, "Who knows? Some fantasy they had. We've all got one… more than one, you know. A person who's only got one fantasy is either some kind of demonic obsessive or very very fortunate to only have one fantasy to try to perform." Fantasy-performing is the step after fantasy-making. The notion of

performativity is particularly interesting where *The Green Berets* is concerned. Of course, John Wayne as an actor is literally performing on screen; but more than this is John Wayne as a person, as an icon, performing in the Butlerian sense. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler explains her idea of gender performativity – masculinity is performed by men and modelled on figures in popular culture and historical memory (what Connell referred to as the "blueprint" for masculinity). In *The Green Berets*, John Wayne is at once performing a role in the script and a role model; interestingly, though, is that the role model he is performing is himself. Herr describes some grunts that would "run around during a fight … making war movies in their heads, doing little guts-and-glory Leatherneck tap dances under fire," performing John Wayne themselves (209). In Kali Tal's article "War looking at film looking at war," she opens with an attack on John Wayne's performative glorification of war:

> Over the last five or six years I have read some 250 Vietnam novels by veterans and combat journalists. I have also worked with and talked with scores of Vietnam veterans. And at some point, several years ago, I became aware of the importance of John Wayne. Not John Wayne, the film actor, or John Wayne, the man, or even John Wayne, the image. No, what I became aware of was John Wayne, the story: the narrative strategy responsible for the deaths of thousands of nineteen- and twenty-year-old boys in Vietnam.

John Wayne "the story" is the performance we see of the cowboy in *Fort Apache* and who John Wayne "the film actor" performs in *The Green Berets*; in other words, he draws on himself in previous movies to perform the soldier in Vietnam. He is effectively performing the same nostalgic ideal of masculine soldier that the men who grew up

watching him do in Vietnam. In his review of Wills' *John Wayne's America*: *The Politics of Celebrity,* Tom Englehardt of the *Los Angeles Times* writes:

> Around his image gathered a near-religious cult. Wills aptly calls this worship "Wayne-olatry." He was probably the closest thing Cold War America had to a national religion – and a thoroughly male-centered one it was. A generation of boys growing up in the shadow of World War II, their fathers' war, idolized him. It was at his altar that they fanned their Matty Mattel six-shooters; it was in his name that they jumped into backyard foxholes to fight off banzai charges.

Herr has a passage conjuring the same childhood scenario:

> One night I woke up and heard the sounds of a firefight going on kilometers away, a "skirmish" outside our perimeter, muffled by distance to sound like the noises we made playing guns as children, KSSSHH KSSSHH; we knew it was more authentic than BANG BANG, it enriched the game and this game was the same, only way out of hand at last, too rich for all but a few serious players. The rules now were tight and absolute, no arguing over who missed who and who was really dead; No fair was no good, Why me? the saddest question in the world. (Herr 55)

The boys in Herr's memory know the more authentic noises of war because of the movies they grew up with "in the shadow of World War II." Their games of war are a performance of the "thoroughly male-centered" images of war from their childhoods. When they are in Vietnam, the "game was the same" – but the rules are different: do-overs and rule contestations are impossible. Their hermeneutics of war are the shattered

memories of the ruins of their models for masculinity. “A lot of things had to be unlearned before you could learn anything at all,” Herr says, “and even after you knew better you couldn’t avoid the ways in which things got mixed, the war itself with those parts of the war that were just like the movies” (210).

Al Lemke, a Marine who served in-country from 1967-1968, recalls during his interview for the Vietnam Veterans Project: “I was really disappointed, because, like I wanted to jump out of airplanes, do like John Wayne, shoot people, stuff like this – even though the reality had hit me, you know” (Smith 3). His disappointment in not being able to “do like John Wayne” because of the Vietnam War’s reality is indicative of reflective nostalgia’s ruins. The best example of these ruins in *Dispatches* comes in a scene where Herr (who is, recall, a correspondent) performed the role of soldier himself:

> One afternoon during the battle for Hue, I was with David Greenway, a correspondent for *Time,* and we found it necessary to move from one Marine position to another … We had to make a run of something like 400 meters up that street, and we knew that the entire way was open to sniper fire, either from the standing sections of the wall on our right or from the rooftops on our left … We were crouching among some barren shrubbery with the Marines, and I turned to the guy next to me, a black marine, and said, “Listen, we’re going to cut out now. Will you cover us?” He gave me one of those amazed, penetrating looks. “you can go out there if you want to, baby, but shee-it…” and he began putting out fire. David and I ran all doubled over, taking cover every forty meters or so behind boulder-sized chunks of smashed wall, and halfway through it I started to laugh, looking at David and shaking my head. …

> "What is it?" he said.
>
> "Oh man, do you realize that I just asked that guy back there to *cover us*?"
>
> "He looked at me with one eyebrow faintly cocked. "Yes," he said. "Yes, you did. Oh isn't that marvelous!"
>
> And we would have laughed all the way up the street, except that toward the end of it we had to pass a terrible thing, a house that had been collapsed by the bombing, bringing with it a young girl who lay stretched out dead on top of some broken wood. The whole thing was burning, and the flames were moving closer and closer to her bare feet. In a few minutes they were going to reach her, and from our concealment we were going to have to watch it. We agreed that anything was better than that and we finished the run.

In this scene, Herr performs the soldier from movies by using their line: "cover us." The Marine he is addressing understands exactly what he means because it evokes the same characterization of movie soldiers for him. Herr and David think it is "marvelous" that he used the phrase – Herr laughs because he cannot believe how like children's war games and war fantasies his experience is. The two of them revel in their performance and derive pleasure from it – until they are confronted with the reality of war. Once they see the dead girl, they remember that despite their performance – despite attempting to replicate the soldier fantasies they know – those fantasies are ruins just as war leaves ruins. They, too, were "making war movies in their heads," but the reality of war intruded on the movie and cut it short. In *First Kill,* Herr underscores the disconnect between what a man is expecting to happen in his future as a soldier and what actually comes to pass:

> Young men are expected to go, and fight, and die. And with young men, it's interesting, it's one of the great clichés of war literature. A young man full of piss and vinegar ready to get into combat and prove his gallantry and courage and make his family proud and his community proud and they go and see what it is and it's too late.

The literally nostalgic idea of bringing glory home but forcing to leave it among the ruins of war are as a result of seeing what Lemke called "the reality" of it. Once the soldiers see it for themselves, "it's too late."

David E. James writes in "Representing Vietnam," "As World War II supplied the model for understanding the Vietnam War, so Hollywood war movies provided the vocabulary for conducting it" (229). Instead I argue that the Hollywood war movies supplied the model for conducting the Vietnam War to the Marines in Michael Herr's *Dispatches*. What is absent is a model for understanding. John Wayne's characters in his war movies, whether set against the Apaches or the Japanese or the Germans, were the model for masculinity the soldiers in Vietnam performed. These models fail the soldiers in Vietnam because it is through reflective and restorative nostalgia that they attempt to perform them. In *Fort Apache*, John Wayne as Captain York is a restoration of the tough masculine soldier archetype when Herr recalls him in the novel. When Herr brings up *The Green Berets*, he dismisses John Wayne's project and character of Colonel Kirby as a ruin left behind from WWII; it cannot possibly accurately represent the Vietnam War. Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July* introduction sums up the struggles Herr's Marines faced against restorative and reflective nostalgia: crippled and come home, he is

at once the restorative monument and the reflective ruin, and completely unlike John Wayne.

Chapter 5:

"Stored there in your eyes":

Traumatic Masculinity and Memory

In "Unclaimed Experience," Cathy Caruth begins by quoting *Dispatches*: "…it took the war to teach it, that you were as responsible for everything you saw as you were for everything you did. The problem was that you didn't always know what you were seeing until later, maybe years later, that a lot of it never made it in at all, it just stayed

stored there in your eyes" (Herr). She goes on to state her argument: "Through the notion of trauma … we can understand that a rethinking of reference is not aimed at eliminating history, but at resituating it in our understanding, that is, of precisely permitting *history* to arise where *immediate understanding* may not" (182). *Dispatches* is Herr's history and attempt at an understanding of his experiences years before in Vietnam. However it is important to note that much of *Dispatches* is made up of pieces for American magazines he wrote at the time of experience. Thus it is a perfect collision of an attempt at immediate understanding and history; a restorative past and reflective past sent forward into the future. Bates explains the urgency in Herr's writing:

> These are the words of a narrator who is too breathless, too high on the adrenaline rush of war, to organize his thoughts into grammatically correct and precisely subordinated sentences. In combat things happen all at once, to the correspondent as well as the soldier, and he captures that simultaneity with an artful use of the comma splice. (242)

Herr's New Journalism technique is a result of his environment and experience. Bates goes on to explain that the novel's title "suggests brief, disconnected communications written under duress and wired to an editor for rewriting and collation with other dispatches" (244). His dispatches back to his editor mimic the memories that alternately fade out of and jump in to focus for Herr and other Marines – symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. This disorder, coined as a result of the Vietnam War, is a constant reliving of the past, or what Bates describes as "Repetition – as opposed to growth, climax, catharsis, or a light at the end of the tunnel" (244).

"Those who remember the past," Herr writes, "are condemned to repeat it too, that's a little history joke. Shove it along, dissolve your souvenirs" (254). The repetition here is not one of acting out a repeated mistake, but reliving it and staying in a limbo between the past's ruins and the future. Herr offers disassociation as a method of dealing with trauma: "This is already a long time ago, I can remember the feelings but I can't still have them. A common prayer for the overattached: You'll let it go sooner or later, why not do it now? Memory print, voices and faces, stories like a filament through a piece of time, so attached to the experience that nothing moved and nothing went away" (28). The trauma remains despite trying to "let it go," although the feelings are remembered, not felt. Therefore the feelings themselves become restorative nostalgia, desperately attempting to remind the soldiers not just of trauma's memory but of trauma's *feeling*. That which refuses to be narrated is that which he can no longer have, but only remember. *Dispatches* becomes the narration of the memory of trauma; he is "consciously *re*telling" (244). After "enough time passed and memory receded and settled," Herr as author could stitch his dispatches together with more recent reflection. In reconstructing the past for his novel, he confronted the signifier of his trauma: "Vietnam Vietnam Vietnam, say again, until the word lost all its old loads of pain, pleasure, horror, guilt, nostalgia" (56). Yet although the word itself has lost these qualities, the memories will never be without trauma: "Everything I see is blown through with smoke, everything is on fire everywhere. It doesn't matter that memory distorts; every image, every sound comes back out of smoke and the smell of things burning" (108). His memories linger on the ruins of the war. Interestingly, the ruins are not trying to rebuild themselves, but remind him of how they were left.

Trauma's function is not to be rebuilt but to remind one that something is ruinous. Caruth explains that trauma is the "story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth" (4). This "speaking wound" is what will "say again" and again – but it remains a wound. The novel's final sentence repeats the repetition of "Vietnam," but with a marked difference: "And no moves for me but to write down some few last words and make the dispersion, Vietnam, Vietnam, Vietnam, we've all been there" (Herr). Here is Herr's slow exhale of helpless relief: there is simply nothing left to say. But the speaking wound recalling the name of the locus of trauma now can add commas – short pauses between the painful regurgitation. Now, with longer, more contemplative stress on the word, Herr can add that "we've all been there." He recognizes that what he is attempting to narrate is nearly inconceivable yet somehow familiar at the same time. The novel mimics this uncanny relationship by jumping forward and back in chronology. Bates ties this device back to the experience of war when he describes this as a stylistic recreation of the "illusion of rapid movement by helicopter" (242).

The spins of a helicopter's blade evoke a sense of disorienting blurriness. Michael Herr's *Dispatches* is the blurriness of the Vietnam War in a novelization. Time's eccentricity is blurry, and it blurs the Marines' understanding of their own masculinity. The past's nostalgic role models for war only confuse the grunts and lead them to feel like failures. The future's foreboding pressure destabilizes their control over their lives, removing their sense of agency and further emasculating them. The American model for masculinity failed the Marines in *Dispatches*. The novel explains that rethinking and

resituating history, in Caruth's words, would have been necessary for Herr and the Marines and in the novel to deal with the trauma of the Vietnam War.

But how could the Marines have avoided their own models for masculinity failing them? How could they have rethought the American military history that led them to their emasculating experiences in Vietnam? In *Dispatches*, the English photograph Tim Page is also on assignment in Vietnam. His British publisher requests that he send photos for a book with the working title *Through With War*, whose purpose it would be to "once and for all 'take the glamour out of war'" (Herr 248). Page reacts:

> 'Take the glamour out of war! I mean, how the bloody hell can you do *that*? Go and take the glamour out of Huey, go take the glamour out of a Sheridan… Can *you* take the glamour out of a Cobra or getting stoned at China Beach? It's like taking the glamour out of an M-79, taking the glamour out of Flynn.' He pointed to a picture he'd taken, Flynn laughing maniacally ('We're winning,' he'd said, triumphantly.) 'Nothing the matter with *that* boy, is there? Would you let your daughter marry that man? Ohhh, war is *good* for you, you can't take the glamour out of that.' (Herr 248)

Page's cultural memory is different from the Americans in *Dispatches*. His British publisher wants to de-glorify the war in Vietnam, a sentiment much more prevalent in places outside of America (though of course still existent there, too). Page names three American helicopters and doing drugs on R&R holidays as being glamorous things inextricable from war; yet they are specific to the American experience of war in Vietnam. Then he points at a picture of Sean Flynn, Hollywood actor Errol Flynn's son. Sean was American and working as a photojournalist alongside Herr and Page. Prior to

that he had worked in Hollywood like his father before him. Each Flynn had played swashbuckling and heroic roles, and each was handsome and manly (*Captain Blood* and *Son of Captain Blood* being two of their most famous roles, respectively). It is significant that the American man who had worked in front of and behind the camera, and whose parentage was part of Hollywood's history, is "laughing maniacally" in the photograph and "triumphantly" saying "'We're winning.'" Of course, the Americans were not winning in 1967 and 1968, and they never did. "Would you let your daughter marry *that* man?" Page asks rhetorically, implying that Flynn's place among the American experiences and weaponry in the Vietnam War proves and exudes masculinity. This is the "glamour" that one cannot remove from war, according to Page. And perhaps he was correct: Flynn went missing and is presumed dead in 1970 at the age of 28. If Sean Flynn represented the American glamour Page said was inextricable from war, he embodied it when he was lost to it. Page, who survived the war, has spent decades attempting to find out what happened to Flynn. Page is fixated on the past, just like the Marines in *Dispatches* had been when he first met them. The glamour of war has once again dissolved into a nostalgic attempt at recreating the past – but it is already in ruins. "Ohhh, war is *good* for you, you can't take the glamour out of that" becomes the ironic and tragic summation for my argument. The glamour of the American past's framing of war convinces the Marines in *Dispatches* that war is good for one's masculinity. The tragedy of course is that once the Marines realize this is not the case, it is, as Herr said, "too late."

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