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**“But in a story, I can steal [its] soul”: Vietnam War Veterans and
the Literature of Catharsis**

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“But in a story, I can steal [its] soul”:

Vietnam War Veterans and the Literature of Catharsis

By

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“It was very sad, he thought. The things men carried inside. The things men did or felt they had to do.” – The Vietnam War and the American Veteran’s Literature

How does a returning veteran cope with the consequences of their experiences in a war they were drafted to fight? How do they face a society that sees that war only in statistics, only in the clips seen on the nightly news across the dinner table, only from what seems like another world? How do they explain how it felt to watch his friends get shot down with a sudden *pop* or step on a grenade and explode in the sky? How do they explain how it felt to kill someone, to take the life of a stranger because they would take theirs if they had the chance? Perhaps the turn to substance abuse. Perhaps they drink in the hopes of forgetting his traumas in the temporary highs. Perhaps they let it consume them. Perhaps they become restless and re-enlist in the military and fights other wars. Or, perhaps, they turn to literature. Perhaps a story can save their soul.

This paper will examine the following selected works of Vietnam War literature:

Matterhorn, by Karl Marlantes, *Chickenhawk*, by Robert Mason, and *The Things They Carried*, by Tim O’Brien. This selection represents one component of Vietnam War literature: that of the white male soldier. Of these three men, one was drafted and two volunteered. One served as a Marine, two with the United States Army. Each represents a different genre, a different approach to trauma through literature. Marlantes employs realist fiction; Mason, memoir; O’Brien, a blending of reality and fiction described here as “metafiction” and “verisimilitude.” They all, however, saw firsthand combat on the ground in Vietnam. Each man saw friends die, fought to save his own life, and decided to write it down.

This thesis examines these three works through the lens of trauma studies and war literature. It examines the varying genres, techniques, and themes employed by each author in his

respective work. It examines their own, individual responses to the Vietnam War. It examines their use of writing and literature as a means of catharsis and healing from the traumatic experiences of the war of which he is a veteran. It will also consider techniques that overlap in the works and will discuss them individually, analyzing the efficacy of such techniques in writing for communicating, recreating, and distancing oneself from the source of trauma. Each author approaches the same topic of personal trauma from service in a highly traumatic war, with distinctive and overlapping characteristics, each creating a powerful work that both educates the reader and provides catharsis for the writer.

The Vietnam War: A Brief History

The Vietnam War spanned 21 violent years, from 1954 to 1975. Vietnam now remembers the war as the “War Against Americans to Save the Nation,” or the American War (Spector). It was a war against communism, a civil war fought with American aid. North Vietnam and their southern allies – the Viet Cong – moved to model the country after the contemporary Soviet Union and China after usurping French control. America, ever the Manifest Destiny enthusiast, allied with South Vietnam for the sake of democracy over communism – a physical manifestation of the Cold War. The United States presence was not enough, however. South Vietnam’s government crumbled under the North Vietnamese force. On July 2nd, 1976, the nation became the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (The Fall of South Vietnam).

American involvement began as monetary and political support (The Kennedy and Johnson Administrations). President Truman’s administration provided some economic and military aid to the Vietnamese before France withdrew in 1954. After France left and Vietnam dissolved into two opposing sides, the United States continued its support of South Vietnam in

the fight against communism. American troops were present at the start, with the Saigon Military Mission beginning on June 1st, 1954 under Colonel Edward Lansdale (Ray). Involvement, however, remained somewhat limited – until 1964. Movements for direct involvement in Vietnam began, with the first United States soldiers landing in 1965. After an allegedly unprovoked attack on American Ships in the Gulf of Tonkin during this time of early support, a congressional resolution was passed (with only two dissenting votes) for America to completely support South Vietnam. President Johnson proceeded to deploy over 500,000 troops in 1968 against communist forces.

At home, America also began to split. The Tet Offensive – a military attack by North Vietnamese forces during a truce period in 1968 – elicited a widespread rise in unsupportive Americans. This was especially due to the televised nature of the war – Americans at home witnessed the violence and horrors onscreen, a far different civilian experience from previous wars. While the offense failed as a military strategy, it succeeded as a political one: more and more Americans objected to the war, questioning its necessity and their country's obligation to fight. Dissenting figures arose, such as Eugene McCarthy, further dividing Americans and illustrating the widespread nature of discontentment with the war. Questions of morality emerged, especially surrounding the use of the draft from 1964 to 1973. 2.2 million young American men were drafted, with those that left for Vietnam making up around 25% of the American force. Even more were heavily influenced into voluntary service, often simply for the sake of the freedom of choosing a military branch (The Military Draft During The Vietnam War).

America withdrew support of the South Vietnamese in 1973, with the last military unit leaving on March 29th (Vietnam War Timeline). Out of the approximately 2,700,000 Americans

that served in the Vietnam War (Military Health History Pocket Card), 58,220 died (Vietnam War U.S. Military Fatal Casualty Statistics). The average age of these American soldiers was 19 years old (Social Makeup of Forces). Yet those that survived and returned home were not welcomed back with open arms. As Karl Marlantes reports to National Public Radio (NPR), his return was traumatic rather than celebrated. “[T]he war held no hurt or humiliation like what happened as [they] drove through a crowd of protesters shouting obscenities at [them], flipping [them] the bird, and pounding on [his] brother's 1960 Valiant with their fists and protest signs. [...His] long imagined safe harbor was sewn with mines of hate” (Coming Home To Less Than A Hero's Welcome) The anti-war movement bred deep animosity against veterans of the war, even those drafted to fight against their will. Even now, the repercussions of this animosity remain. 47% of homeless veterans (which compose approximately 40% of the nation's homeless population) are estimated to be Vietnam veterans (Homeless Veterans). Post-war support was hugely neglected and often replaced with furthered damage, only enforcing the traumas of combat itself.

While it may be argued that no war is ever moral, the Vietnam War especially pushed these boundaries. Chemical tactics such as Agent Orange , an herbicide to clear the forests of Vietnam that causes health impacts through generations, and napalm, petrochemicals used as incendiaries (Napalm Biography), were heavily and controversially used. “One million people in Vietnam have disabilities or health problems associated with Agent Orange,” reports the Red Cross, with “[a]bout 2.6 million U.S. military personnel[...] believed to have been exposed to the chemical” (King). Neither Vietnamese civilians nor American soldiers were left unscathed by these ethically problematic forms of warfare. Largely due to these tactics, approximately 2 million civilians and 1.1 million North Vietnamese and Viet Cong soldiers died (Spector). The

Vietnam War was driven by controversial motives and fought with equally controversial war tactics. This emerges in the voices of Americans, both those at home and those in combat. Now, 45 years after American withdrawal, it emerges most clearly and accessibly in literature.

The Vietnam War left a particularly dark and scarring mark on its victims, especially on its soldiers. The use of the draft itself was highly controversial, the conditions deadly for reasons far beyond weapon and combat injuries. Millions of young American men were sent overseas, many harboring personal and moral objection to United States involvement. They fought for their lives against strangers and diseases and the jungle itself. Many died. Those that returned home would live with their traumas forever. Out of these traumas was borne the collection of Vietnam War literature now present. This section of literature explores personal trauma and experience while simultaneously placing a rejected history on accessible pages. Several veterans found therapy in writing, in externalizing the internal, in describing the indescribable. The Vietnam War now exists in ink, between tangible covers, telling the stories of men that otherwise may not be heard.

Marlantes, Mason, and O'Brien: Selected Works and Representation

Writing provides a voice to the voiceless, a description to the indescribable. As what seems a natural consequence, many Vietnam War veterans turned to the craft of writing to save their own souls. Out of trauma is borne art – fiction, nonfiction, and works lying somewhere in between traditional literary bounds. While varied in technique, they share a notion of healing, of need, of a “write-or-die” feeling. No two authors tell the same story, but echoes resound off the covers of the books that contain them. Bits and pieces of one author’s work appear in another, a

testament to shared struggles, fears, and traumas across veterans – both those that write and those that do not.

Karl Marlantes, an Oxford University Rhodes Scholar, voluntarily enlisted for active duty with the United States Marine Corps after just one semester of college in 1968. He was 22 years old. He returned one year later in 1969, having earned the honors of several awards – including a Navy Cross – as well as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder that went undiagnosed until the mid 1990s. He began writing immediately, attempting to sell his first novel, *Matterhorn*, in 1978. Instead of being published, it was shot down repeatedly. Publishers argued that Americans did not want to read it, that, ironically, Vietnam was a war they wanted to forget. *Matterhorn* was finally published in 2009 (Q&A With Karl Marlantes). This piece of realist fiction were later followed by Marlantes's nonfiction *What It is Like to Go to War* in 2011 and *Deep River*, concerning imperial Russia, in 2019. *Matterhorn* seemed ready to speak before its audience was prepared to listen, but now resides among the works of Marlantes's fellow Vietnam veterans.

Robert Mason signed up for the United States Army as a pilot under the comforting blanket of peacetime in 1964, never believing his service would become what it did. What he did know, he says, was “that [he] wanted to fly. And there was nothing [he] wanted to fly more than helicopters” (Mason, 18). This desire to fly would ultimately send him traveling across oceans to Vietnam, where he would experience that – and much more. He returned in 1968, later learning of the PTSD he brought back. He has since published several books, most notably his memoirs of his service in Vietnam: *Chickenhawk* (1983), a memoir of his time as an Army soldier, and *Chickenhawk: Back in the World Again: Life After Vietnam* (1994), a sequel to the first memoir.

William Timothy O'Brien was 23 years old when he was sent to Vietnam. He was a reluctant Army soldier – Third Platoon, A Company, Fifth Battalion, 46th Infantry (Tim

O'Brien). O'Brien spent one year fighting a war he did not support. He returned to America in 1970 with a Purple Heart and a mind full of unspeakable horrors. O'Brien thus began writing, creating a chronicle of his Vietnam War service through the written word. *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* was first published in 1973, *Going After Cacciato* in 1978, and *The Things They Carried* in 1990. *If I Die in a Combat Zone* is a memoir, telling his story as his own. *Going After Cacciato* moves a step further, blending reality and fiction together to communicate the incommunicable. His most well-known work, *The Things They Carried*, is explicitly denoted as a work of fiction on its title page, yet perhaps feels even more real than his nonfiction.

Some works, like Marlantes's, come through the genre of realistic fiction.

“Fundamentally, in literature, realism is the portrayal of life with fidelity. It is thus not concerned with idealization, with rendering things as beautiful when they are not, or in any way presenting them in any guise as they are not” (Cuddon, 591). When applied to fiction, realism indicates a true-to-life representation of events through fictitious names, places, and events. *Matterhorn* follows this method, illustrating Marine Lieutenant Waino Mellas – a character not far removed from Marlantes himself. Fiction seems to add a barrier, a further step between the self and the story. This novel tells a highly realistic, detailed account of the firsthand combat experience of a young American soldier in the Vietnam War. While it may not embody Marlantes's service directly, it certainly illustrates that of a young Marine soldier in the midst of Vietnam.

Other works, like Mason's, come through the genre of nonfiction memoir, or autobiography. This is defined as “[a] person's own account of his or her life. Unlike private records such as journals or diaries, which such a definition might also describe, autobiographies are always written for a public audience” (Cuddon, 60). Mason's work tells his own story – that

of a young Army volunteer that signed up to fly helicopters, relying on the continuation of peacetime. Here, he blatantly shares his personal, firsthand experiences of Vietnam through his own eyes. He does not create a fictional self, as Marlantes does, but delves into his own traumas and memories as his own. It seems to allow Mason claim over his mind, over his past. While this more direct tactic does not include that additional boundary of the fictitious character, it also gives the account of a young American soldier in the depths of Vietnam.

Between nonfiction memoir and realist fiction resides verisimilitude and metafiction. Verisimilitude is defined as “the quality of appearing realistic or true” (Cambridge Dictionary) and metafiction as “[a]ny work of fiction which seems preoccupied by its own fictionality or with the nature of fiction generally. In the same way as a metalanguage reflects on language(s), metafiction is fiction whose subject is fiction” (Cuddon, 431). O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* escapes the conventions of traditional literature by blending reality and fiction. A collection of vignettes with overarching characters and themes, O’Brien’s work explores the boundaries of literature while communicating his own traumas through the written word. This form both removes the author from the work and allows for direct, personal, candid accounts. O’Brien thanks his invented characters in the acknowledgments of his work, including himself as Tim throughout the vignettes alongside them. O’Brien benefits from the advantages of both Marlantes’s and Mason’s techniques through this ambiguous genre to tell his own story of being a Vietnam War soldier.

These three pieces of literature represent a small portion of trauma literature and trauma studies. The field spans a wide variety of traumatic experiences, not all as widespread as a war. War literature itself provides a unique category of trauma literature, with the same or similar traumatic events widely shared. Vietnam War literature composes an important point of

consideration for war literature as well. As such a controversial and notably traumatic war, it varies from the works concerning other wars. Its contents deal with warfare tactics such as napalm and Agent Orange, with moral opposition to a draft that ordered 2.2 million American boys to fight in a war they would not win, with the fight against nature and the overwhelming jungle in a terrain they did not recognize.

Trauma Studies: An Overview

Perhaps one of the best vehicles for understanding Vietnam war literature is through trauma studies. Literature often serves as a means of coping or catharsis for its authors. This theme has blossomed into a field of examination dubbed trauma studies. Trauma theory is defined as “[a]n interdisciplinary theoretical body that draws from psychoanalytic, feminist, and poststructuralist discourses and focuses on the study of both personal trauma[...] and collective experiences of trauma[...]. The theory offers a framework for understanding experiences that – by definition – overwhelm the coping mechanisms of individuals, and involves enquiry into the relationship between memory and truth and the ways that testimony can aid the recovery process” (Cuddon, 736). This field of study examines the impacts of trauma on individuals through the literature they create. “[A] traumatic experience challenges the limits of language, fragments the psyche, and even ruptures meaning altogether,” a testament to the write-or-die feeling (Ballaev, 360). Trauma changes perspectives, lives, and individuals. Consequently, it changes the ways and reasons behind why these individuals write.

Drawn significantly from psychological theory, the field of trauma studies examines the purposes of “talking” about traumatic events with writing and literature. As examined by Sigmund Freud in his work, “[b]ecause the original event continues to inflict harm, the talking

cure or abreaction is required to understand the effects of the past and gain freedom from its symptom-causing grasp” (Ballaeu, 361). Literature may prove itself to be the “writing cure” – a means of coming to terms with traumatic experiences through the written word. Though not a true cure, “[t]he narrative of the event is crucial to recovery,” allowing the narrator to separate from the events of the past rather than reliving them repeatedly. Literature allows the writer to leave some trauma behind, to divide it from their person, to move past and look back instead of constantly facing the trauma (362). The act of writing dissociates the author from the words on the page, creating space for healing.

Trauma theory fills in gaps left by other approaches to the concept. “Trauma’s psychoanalytic conundrum for scholars, as conceptualized in this model, is its inability to be properly assimilated into the psyche and memory” (364). Perhaps literature aids in this assimilation. The act of writing, of externalizing internal trauma, of putting mind to matter, seems a source of healing and progress, thus the emergence of trauma theory in the 1990s. Literature also often reflects on culture, on the resulting social state or issues that emerge from widespread traumatic effects. It tests the bounds of language and the bounds of writing.

Trauma impacts different groups and influences them in different ways. Its victims divide into three general categories: the perpetrators, the victims, and the bystanders. “Perpetrator trauma occurs when individuals and collectives feel they have acted in ways that are contrary to their own deeply held moral beliefs” and results in a deep sense of guilt and remorse (Eyerman, 167). Victim trauma results from a traumatic experience happening *to* the individual. Bystanders, such as survivors, witness the occurrence of a traumatic experience happen to another and often feel guilt for not being the victim themselves. The question thus arises: Where do American Vietnam War veterans fall? What category of trauma best describes the feelings these individuals

cope with through their writing? The answer seems to vary, many soldiers finding themselves in different situations under each category, or those that encompass all three. The drafted soldier or the wounded soldier likely experiences victim trauma, the killer, perpetrator trauma, the survivor of a bloody battle, bystander trauma. Most soldiers would find themselves, at some point or another, in each of these contexts.

Though often highly individualized for different situations, in times of great trauma, these categories may merge. “For both Germans confronting the Holocaust and Americans confronting the My Lai Massacre [of the Vietnam War], the roles of perpetrator, victim, and bystander were made relatively fluid as the trauma of war was worked through” (Eyerman, 169). The dissolution of boundaries as well as the variety of contexts and events individuals find themselves within makes these collective events, such as the Vietnam War, significant points of consideration within the field of trauma studies.

Trauma theory has been used to help understand many literary works, such as those about the Holocaust, slavery, and war. War trauma especially provides an important point of consideration, specifically that of the Vietnam War. Kali Tal “suggest[s] a new way of interpretation [of Vietnam War literature] based on a theory of literature of trauma” in “Speaking the Language of Pain,” wishing to “point out the failures and limitations” of traditional examinations of the literature (217). Trauma studies, she argues, provides an invaluable lens with which to examine the literature of the Vietnam War, filling the gaps of understanding that may otherwise exist in the criticism. This war’s controversial, violent nature sets it apart from many others in American history – and many of its veterans still live today, still coping with the experiences they faced over four decades earlier. The literature resulting from these experiences, therefore, should be examined through trauma literature and trauma criticism.

Traditional criticism of Vietnam War literature falls dangerously short of truly understanding the works, in Tal's view – "[b]ecause their [other frameworks'] critical strategies cannot encompass the actual events of the war, they must ignore these events and concentrate on symbol and image" (223). The trauma behind the war experiences themselves drives the creation of the products themselves. To understand such works, one needs understand the reasons behind their creation. "Literature of trauma[...] is the product of three omniscient factors: the experience of trauma, the urge to bear witness, and a sense of community" (217-218). Creation of literature acts as an integral piece of an internal process, of understanding trauma and understanding what (and who) comes after. These aspects tie closely to the work and should be examined to allow the author to truly share his or her message.

Vietnam War literature seems a perfect candidate for the use of trauma criticism despite these traditional examinations. This field of criticism provides invaluable insight to readers and critics with which to understand not only the literature itself, but the authors and the war behind it. It allows for a much deeper and significant level of comprehension, beyond the traditional literary analysis of symbols and thematic representations. It gives voice to personal experience and individuality. It aims to understand the people, their conflicts, and their stories on a far more personalized level. It values a war often forgotten and ignored by its country, and it values the individuals that took part in it firsthand – be it willing or not. Through trauma criticism, Vietnam War literature is listened to, not just heard.

The Vietnam War in Literature through Trauma Studies

The traumas of the Vietnam War echo throughout the works of Marlantes, Mason, and O'Brien. Each tells his own story through his own means, each using the written word to cope

with a traumatic past. These works are examined by order of genre – first through the familiar and often explored form of realistic fiction, then the highly personal and truthful memoir, then a blend of the two through metafiction and verisimilitude. This thesis aims to examine each of these works through the lens of trauma studies. It will analyze the techniques and themes present in each work for purpose and effect on the work, as well as compare and contrast overlapping techniques and the implications of these shared features, specifically within the context of trauma criticism. It will also briefly discuss the times of publications of these works and the cultural contexts in which they occur. Ultimately, this thesis aims to understand the techniques that render successful communication of and coping with traumas as devastating as those inflicted during and by the Vietnam War, as well as its aftermath, on its American veterans, within the larger context of the urge to bring internal conflict to the world of literature.

These works reside among an ocean of accounts of the Vietnam War. Almost all of these works come from other American veterans, each working to capture their memories in some way. Some employ fiction, some memoir, some emerging in the gray spaces in between. Works emerge as early as 1954, such as Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*, and as culturally significant as *We Were Soldiers Once... And Young* by General Howard Moore and journalist Joseph Galloway. Most explore similar themes, exploiting similar tactics to elicit the largely shared goal of explaining what cannot be explained. This collective body of Vietnam War literature preserves a war not always remembered, memorializing a vital piece of American history by cathartically, unapologetically putting it down in words. These works, through a variety of techniques and from several perspectives, speak to the larger body of American Vietnam War literature – communicating the incommunicable of a dark piece of American history.

“It was all absurd, without reason or meaning. People who didn't know each other were going to kill each other over a hill none of them cared about.” – *Matterhorn*, Karl

Marlantes

The intersection of trauma theory and Vietnam War literature visibly appears in Karl Marlantes's *Matterhorn*. The history now marked in textbooks finds space in literature like this as well, with Marlantes sharing his own account of Vietnam and its impact on him through this work of realist fiction. Marlantes's 2009 novel follows young Lieutenant Waino Mellas of the United States Marines. Mellas faces firsthand the combat of the Vietnam War, alongside the rest of his comrades in Bravo Company, filled with aspirations of political mobility and increasing his rank. They are “dropped into the mountain jungle of Vietnam as boys and forced to fight their way into manhood” (Cover copy, *Matterhorn*). The group struggles with conflict between American soldiers, with disease and injury from the jungle, with nature itself preventing resupply and medical assistance. Ultimately, the platoon must fight for control of Matterhorn – the novel's titular hill, dubbed after the famous mountain. *Matterhorn* shares a story of fear, hope, and unity, of war against friends, against strangers, and against the land of Vietnam itself.

Marlantes's novel employs realist fiction to share his own experiences as a Marine in Vietnam. Realism creates a unique space for creation and understanding. Fiction allows the author a means of imagination and the freedoms to shift or change features of stories while maintaining the feelings and the impacts of the events. In *Matterhorn*, realist fiction permits Marlantes to share his personal story without forcing the “truth.” Facts imply accuracy and historical reality, while truth indicates events and feelings larger than this – often beyond facts. Details need not be exact, places and names may shift, without damaging the integrity of the story being told. Readers that pick up *Matterhorn* understand this contract – the novel they read

does not directly represent the literal experiences of the author, yet it represents the memories, the feelings, the most significant components he wishes to share with his readers.

Marlantes's realistic fiction novel employs several techniques and features to convey these memories and feelings effectively. This thesis examines three select features that seem particularly significant in *Matterhorn*'s story. Analysis of the first feature, vulgarity and the repeated theme of war as sex, illustrates attitudes held by American soldiers of the Vietnam War. It describes feelings of disgust and helplessness, perhaps even embodying the rejection of both the war and its soldiers by the country. The second feature, land as the enemy, further emphasizes helplessness. The communist army of North Vietnam seems far less threatening to the soldiers than Vietnam itself. Finally, youth highlights the ages of these soldiers – of the average age of 19 – and what the youth of these soldiers means in the context of war experiences themselves. These three selected features do not represent all of the novel, but represents some of the most poignant ones used to communicate the feelings and experiences of the Vietnam War.

Youth

Perhaps the most visible technique employed by Marlantes in his novel is the constant description of youth, specifically of the soldiers' youth. The average age of the American Vietnam War soldier was 19 years old, something Marlantes does not neglect in *Matterhorn*. His readers cannot forget the ages of the young men they follow or what this means for those men. Not only does Marlantes highlight the youth of his characters, he highlights their innocence. He describes them as boys, not young men, crying for their mothers in the face of some of the most terrifying realities humanly possible. These are not seasoned soldiers with years of training –

these are boys freshly graduated from high school, moving from the safety of the classroom to fighting for their lives in the middle of the jungle on the other side of the world.

Marlantes refers to the young soldiers as “kids” throughout the majority of the novel, especially in scenes of combat or significant distress. “Cassidy, these kids are fucking *tired*,” (108) comes the defense of the young soldiers struggling without rest or adequate food. Not only are there soldiers undergoing horrendous conditions, their needs neglected by those in charge, this is happening to kids, to children. This emphasizes a new level of inhumanity for these soldiers – children should not be subject to such conditions. It highlights the inequity in rank and decision-making, with those above them calling every shot despite the soldiers being the ones on the ground, fighting and dying and struggling to survive. This inequity appears even in the ground soldiers, every man struggling for as much power as he can attain. When addressed more informally, Hawke insists on “the ‘sir’ [with] a little personal animosity in it as a mother’s insistence on ‘may I’ in place of her child’s ‘can I’” (25). An air of resentment for the level of “kid” emerges, a rejection of the description and a scramble for something higher, the rank of the parent rather than the child. Youth highlights the hierarchy controlling the lives of these young Marines, of the lack of dominion over the soldiers’ own actions though these soldiers are the ones to lose their lives.

Marlantes pays careful attention to physical descriptions of the youth of these soldiers throughout *Matterhorn*. Pollini’s “hands [are] the large ones of an old carpenter, with big yellow nails, yet his face under his mop of curly black hair look[s] like that of a choirboy who’d fallen in the mud” (132). The sharp contrast between the weathered, rough hands and the almost startlingly youthful face strikes readers, a reference to the difference between the age of these soldiers and the horrors they face. The war has turned the hands of a choirboy into those of a

carpenter, a young child into a weathered worker in a hard labor career. The North Vietnamese Army soldiers receive no different treatment: “[t]hey looked about fifteen or sixteen years old” (484). The entire Vietnam War seems to be fought solely by children, by youth conscripted by their elders to face unspeakable horrors, to survive, to kill.

The use of youth also highlights the fear held by these soldiers, as well as some of the debilitating impacts of the experiences they undergo. As the soldiers continue struggling through their instructions, one collapses. Mellas looks at him, taking the time to really see the young soldier’s face, “just the face of an eighteen-year-old kid with a peace medallion around his neck” (226). Mellas does not see a soldier, he sees a kid – one on the brink of collapse, with “[a]n ordinary human face” (226). He brings individual faces to the men largely remembered as statistics in American history. He brings innocence and trauma, weakness and courage to his characters. When the platoon struggles up the side of the cliff towards a suspected North Vietnamese Army hideout, Jermain and Robertson break down. “Both of them were crying openly, like small children who needed to be fed and tucked into bed” (245). These young men fear for their lives, knowing they could easily be killed in the name of someone else’s war shortly. Though fictional, these characters represent the real, true to life without the bounds of telling the specific details of truth. The soldiers of Vietnam were these young men, these children in a bloody, morally gray war, riddled with violence and terror.

“No matter how much combat experience they had, they were still only nineteen” (491). Despite everything these soldiers witness, despite the combat, despite the trauma, the age of these soldiers cannot change – the soldiers of the Vietnam War were little older than children. Barely old enough to vote, these soldiers fought one of the most ethically and morally ambiguous wars in history. Marlantes does not shy away from this jarring fact – rather, he embraces it,

placing it directly in front of his audience, impossible to miss or look past. Purposeful and poignant, Marlantes's use of youth throughout *Matterhorn* comments without hesitation on the war and those responsible for the young soldiers instructed to fight it. This reflects also in works like *The Things They Carried*, indicative of the trauma resulting from the age of these soldiers throughout the Vietnam War.

Vulgarity

How do soldiers communicate disdain for the situation they find themselves in? Perhaps this disdain simply stems from the youth of these American soldiers. Or, perhaps vulgar speech provides some outlet, a means of communicating deeply held anger, frustration, or helplessness. Marlantes does not shy away from vulgarity in his writing, embracing the speech that may make his readers cringe or turn away altogether. This means of speech seems integral to telling Marlantes's story, integral to the lives of his characters and the many men they represent. Throughout *Matterhorn*, Marlantes employs vulgar language in a reflection of soldiers' attitudes and an exploration of one outlet of such attitudes and subsequent emotions.

Mellas provides a significant point of consideration throughout the novel with which to examine Marlantes's use of vulgarity. As a new recruit at the beginning of *Matterhorn*, Mellas makes a promise to himself to not speak the way his fellow soldiers do – “They all talked the same, too, saying fuck, or some adjective, noun, or adverb with fuck in it, every four words. Most of the intervening three words of their conversations dealt with unhappiness about food, mail, time in the bush, and girls they had left behind in school. Mellas swore he'd succumb to none of it.” (Marlantes, 2). This, however, is not a promise he keeps. As the novel moves forward and Mellas begins to experience the terrors, the politics, the violence around him, his

language begins to turn into that which he initially looks down upon. By the end of the novel, Mellas speaks the same as all of the other war-worn men around him, using words like “fuck” just as frequently as the others.

Mellas’s gradual breaking down, from shiny new recruit focused on upward movement and internal politics to traditional, angry ground soldier seems to embody the emotional and mental tolls of the war on its soldiers. By *Matterhorn*’s close, and though it is far from the end of Mellas’s deployment, Mellas has become a drastically different man. Watching friends die, nearly starving to death, almost losing an eye to a combat injury and every other horrific event contained in the novel’s pages seems to have taken its toll. Something has fundamentally changed within *Matterhorn*’s protagonist, as it did within the minds and bodies of the millions of real-life soldiers in the Vietnam War.

Another vital component of Marlantes’s use of vulgarity is the recurring use of sex as symbolism for the war and its impact on soldiers. An operation by Bravo Company is described as “[a]nother inch of the green dildo” (125) and the Marine Corps itself as “the Crotch” (130). Both embody feelings of helplessness, a sense of disgust and implications of a form of rape and lack of control. “America uses us like whores, Simpson,” explains Mulvaney. “Yeah, we’re whores[...] But we’re good ones. We’re good at fucking[...] But this time the customer doesn’t want to fuck. He wants to play horsy and come in through the back door[...] We ain’t good at that. It turns our stomach. And it’s destroying us” (262). This graphic, sexualized explanation highlights some of the deepest issues with the Vietnam War, examining how it differs from previous wars and how that difference impacts the men fighting it. Here, all war is prostitution, all damaging to its victims. However, the Vietnam War stands out among other wars, a

somewhat subtle look at the particular inhumanities of the draft, of war tactics, of perhaps even American involvement in the first place.

Vulgarity in *Matterhorn* provides a lens into the thoughts and feelings of disgust, of helplessness, of anger and more developed by American soldiers in the Vietnam War. It allows readers to see how war changes its soldiers through Mellas, providing a tangible means of tracking his feelings and attitudes as he begins to experience the realities of the war he serves in. It allows readers to see how the war violated its soldiers, how it destroyed them. While perhaps Marlantes's readers cannot directly understand the realities of Vietnam veterans, they may find themselves closer to comprehension through a more familiar sight such as vulgar language or sex itself. Perhaps, even beyond this, it signals a coming-of-age – an initiation into the war itself and the vulgarity it embodies, bringing readers along through the process. *Matterhorn* in this way echoes the writings of the other authors examined here, a further testament to the significance of this feature.

Land as Enemy

Matterhorn takes a unique approach to the war through the eyes of its soldiers: rather than focus on combat, on the battles fought between American soldiers and Vietnamese soldiers, Marlantes places far more emphasis on the battles against the land of Vietnam itself. The enemy does not lurk in the jungle – it is the jungle. For much of the novel, Bravo Company fights the land around them instead of the men they were sent to the land to fight. Marlantes draws his readers to the apparent purposelessness of the war through this conflict, drawing the focus and the political power away from the communist forces America joined the war to combat.

Vietnam itself fights against Bravo Company throughout *Matterhorn*. Persistent fog prevents resupply, leaving the young men to starve and fend for themselves with limited ammunition. “The point man is also blindfolded by the jungle” (171), struggling to combat the human threat with the presence of nature’s own threat against him. The land of Vietnam almost does not allow the war to be fought, imposing obstacles throughout the novel. As Parker dies of sudden fever and Challand suffers with him, the land itself prevents the arrival of a helicopter with medical aid in time to save him. The helicopter “[akes] out two bodies not yet on the planet twenty years, one living and one dead” (238). The landscape kills Parker, the source of the illness in the first place and the force preventing his rescue.

Death and injury seems equally prevalent, if not more, in the jungles of Vietnam than in combat scenes. Fisher, present only at the beginning and end of the novel, gets “a leech right smack up the hole in his cock” (8) and returns only after much of the novel’s events have passed. Fisher is incapacitated by an animal, a creature native to the land he must invade. Another soldier, Williams, falls victim to a similar fate, though he does not survive his attack – “[a] tiger got him” (158). Williams dies in the jungle, not at the hands of the Vietnamese soldiers, but by the violent teeth and claws of a tiger. Vietnam seems to fight back against America with a mind of its own, speaking powerfully to the nature of America’s presence in the war and attitudes of the soldiers that fight it. These soldiers fear Vietnam’s combat as they fear the Vietnamese army and must struggle against it as they struggle against the foreign soldiers themselves.

Despite the constant struggle against Vietnam by Bravo Company, they cannot seem to win their battles. “The company left no more mark on the jungle than a ship’s wake on the sea” (162). The cycle of nature continues, erasing the presence of American soldiers. Plant life returns, fog and rain continue, removing footprints and bodies, foxholes and bullets. “The jungle

would slowly creep up the hill, once again sheltering the exposed clay and rock, hiding the garbage thrown down its sides, softening the artificial lip of the LZ, and rounding Matterhorn smooth once again” (492). The jungle erases all progress, all signs of combat, returning to a previous state untouched by war.

Marlantes’s use of the land of Vietnam reflects a sense of purposelessness, of the ineffectiveness of the Vietnam War. It also illustrates a form of chaos, largely in an anti-pastoral form. American involvement did not win the war against the North Vietnamese. In 1975, the war would end, Vietnam becoming the Socialist Republic of Vietnam under communist leadership. 2.2 million drafted and millions more voluntary American servicemen would have served without success. The North would win, rendering American presence seemingly pointless. The enemy becomes not the Vietnamese Army, but Vietnam and the Vietnam War itself. 58,220 young American soldiers die to lose a war they do not choose to fight. Marlantes transforms the war into an enemy for his readers as well, alluding perhaps to the war as an enemy for America itself.

Matterhorn in Trauma Studies

Marlantes’s novel deals greatly with the traumas of his own service in the Vietnam War. His character reflects himself dramatically, in age, rank, personal background, and military branch. Literature, specifically through the means of realistic fiction, provides an outlet through which *Matterhorn* becomes a tool – a means of coping with and sharing the traumas of the Vietnam War. Literature of trauma, such as this novel, “is the product of three coincident factors: the experience of trauma, the urge to bear witness, and a sense of community” (Tal, 217-218). *Matterhorn* demonstrates each of these aspects throughout the course of the novel, a reflection of

its significance for Marlantes and the importance of the novel's creation – both individually and communally.

The experience of trauma occurs throughout the novel. Partaking in the Vietnam War itself inflicts a sort of trauma, something Marlantes specifically explores at various points in his writing. Mellas reaches several realizations of absurdity, of the horrors of his situation. “People who didn't even know each other were going to kill each other over a hill none of them cared about,” (Marlantes, 343). Mellas finds himself in the middle of a war he finds no purpose in, struggling against nature and an army to survive, sustaining an injury that almost causes him to lose his eye, killing and watching his friends die. When he attempts (and fails) to save a fellow American soldier in his company, Pollini, he realizes he may have, accidentally, been the one to kill him – “[i]f he made it out alive he'd carry this doubt with him forever” (359). These feelings do not go away, they cling to those that feel them, they weigh them down like lead. The experiences of such trauma resides in the pages of *Matterhorn*, a means of containment and externalization of the things these veterans carry with them forever.

Seemingly, the natural consequence of experiencing such traumas is the urge to bear witness. These feelings and memories that cling forever pressure those that live with their burden into sensing this urge to share them. Mallory's headache, an explicit manifestation of trauma in *Matterhorn*, is ignored even by his fellow soldiers. This ignorance ultimately leads to a complete breakdown, with Mallory brandishing a gun in the face of a medic and getting locked inside of a cargo box (320-322). The trauma grows and grows until it becomes too much to bear. “I don't need fucking pills. I need help,” Mallory screams, a desperate cry for a solution. No one will listen, no one will help – only ignorance and suppression are subscribed. Mellas finds himself

subject to this urge as well, when Hamilton dies. “He ha[s] no idea why he [is] talking. He just ha[s] to tell someone” (488).

This urge to bear witness feeds directly into a search for and sense of community. Bearing witness requires those to share this witness with. Comradery and community blooms among Bravo Company throughout *Matterhorn*, an expression of the unifying force of such traumas. When Mellas finds himself on his final “mystery tour” of the novel he realizes “that the five of them had shared experiences no one else had shared or would share” (552). The veterans of Bravo Company, of the Vietnam War itself, share a background not shared by anyone else. They create a community that cannot be joined by outsiders, one founded in deep trauma and horror. Even in writing and publishing *Matterhorn*, a sense of community is established. The literature is shared, is provided to audiences. A community is created – reaching both veterans of the Vietnam War and those who cannot fathom the experiences contained in *Matterhorn*’s pages.

Matterhorn provides a powerful example of Vietnam War literature, of literature by Vietnam veterans. Marlantes encapsulates each aspect of trauma literature and trauma studies. There is no handbook for soldiers to cope with the ailments of these traumas. “At the Naval Academy, no one had ever talked about what to do afterward” (364), and “the lecturer hadn’t mentioned the psychological effects on the troops” (383). Left to their own devices, veterans like Marlantes turn to the words of literature, creating a chronicle of traumatic experience and finding a means of coping in these words. The pages of *Matterhorn* and other works like it demonstrate far more than just war stories, they indicate a powerful need for healing and a sense of progress towards it, working to heal unseen wounds through almost instinctual means.

“I had escaped Vietnam[...], but I had not escaped my memories.” – *Chickenhawk*, Robert Mason

Robert Mason published *Chickenhawk*, his first work and the first installment of what would eventually become his two part memoir, in 1983 – almost immediately before serving a five year prison sentence for smuggling marijuana into the United States (Chandler).

Chickenhawk shares Mason’s personal account of Vietnam, from his initial interest in the United States Army for the sole purpose of flying helicopters to his arrest and sentencing for drug trafficking. Most of the work takes place during the war, a chronicle of violence and fear.

Mason’s writing shares his own experiences through his own eyes, changing only the names of his fellow servicemen and attempting to recount the details of his time as truthfully as possible.

The memoir medium provides a unique outlet through which authors share personal experiences. Previously defined as “[a] person’s own account of his or her life[...] written for a public audience” (Cuddon, 60), Mason puts this highly individualized and realistic form to use. *Chickenhawk* comes 17 years after the end of Mason’s deployment in 1966. Nearly two full decades after his own time in Vietnam and eight years after the official end of the war, Mason still recounts the details of his service as though he wrote them as they happened. While some unintentional errors may have been made and though not every word of every quote may be direct, the minutia is staggering. These events and interactions, these feelings and words clearly stuck in some unshakeable way, building into a book (and ultimately two books) that Mason felt needed to be written and shared. Thus his memoir was born, a testament to the persistence of such memories and the impact of the war on Mason, both during and long after the war.

The impact of these memories and experiences traces throughout *Chickenhawk*. Through the memoir medium and various writing and visual modes, Mason creates a compelling and

poignant narrative of his time in Vietnam while also allowing himself a means through which to process the realities of his memories. *Chickenhawk* employs many techniques to build this story, among them being sections and titles, photographs, and dreams. Sections and titles provide a roadmap through which the experiences may be simplified while representing significant periods of the war and how it changed Mason. Photographs provide a sense of reality, a form of proof to cement the realities of the events within the memoir's pages – both for readers and the author himself. Dreams embody the trauma that emerges over the work's progression, a somewhat tangible manifestation that both illustrates the impact of Vietnam and how unreal many of the events may seem and feel. These features, as well as many others, make Mason's memoir a touching and terrifying piece of violence and trauma, of war and recovery.

Sections and Titles

Mason divides his memoir into three major sections (excluding the prologue and epilogue components). Each section is named and begins with an appropriate quote. While his chapters follow the same structure, the three main sections of the book hold particular significance in the communication of Mason's experiences. The three sections – “Virgins,” “Swave and Deboner,” and “Short-Timer's Blues” – represent various stages a form of traditional character development over the course of the memoir. These sections illustrate the great change inflicted by the Vietnam War on Mason, dividing time periods and experiences into chronological sections. These sections function together to trace an overarching change, a shift from the Robert Mason that exists before the war and the Robert Mason that emerges from the torturous grasp of Vietnam.

The first section of the memoir, “Virgins,” denotes an initial innocence, one implied to be lost over the course of the memoir. It denotes a form of purity soon to be taken away, a sense of

vulnerability. “Virgin” is a term associated largely with youth. It often becomes an insult in young people, especially men, one held against one another as a sign of inexperience – sex becoming an area in which the “virgin” needs to catch up. However, losing one’s virginity is far from being without risk. Mason’s use of the title demonstrates similar notions in the context of the Vietnam War. A young pilot fresh from training, he finds himself sent across the world to fight in Vietnam. He has yet to fully experience the violence, the comradery, or the violence of Vietnam. He is a new guy, a virgin among seasoned soldiers – an outsider that won’t remain on the outside for long. Mason’s “virginity” is lost quickly and violently, lost to the traumas of the war.

Mason’s second section of *Chickenhawk*, “Swave and Deboner,” represents another step along his journey of experiencing the traumas of the Vietnam War. Its purposeful misspelling immediately becomes apparent to readers, highlighted by the section’s introductory quote – “‘I am a swave and deboner army aviator,’ [Connors] said. ‘The word is suave,’ I said. ‘Not over here it ain’t’” (Mason 231). A purposeful parody of the familiar “suave and debonair”, the title reflects a sense of uncomfortable alteration. It is recognizable but wrong, a representation of the discomfort and horror of experiencing the Vietnam War. The phrase, in its original form, indicates a form of grace and elitism. Mason’s version represents a world that is twisted from the typical, wrought with darkness. Grace does not seem possible in Mason’s Vietnam, not in its true form. Suave and debonair cannot fully be attained, leaving a shifted replacement to fill the space instead. A sort of growth emerges in this section change, but not a positive sort. The memoir moves from the innocent to something off-putting, something not fully right.

Mason’s final section of the memoir, “Short-Timer’s Blues,” chronicles the close of his service in the war and his ultimate return home after his service. It explores the anxieties and

fears that come with the close. Despite the constant yearning for home, the end does not come peacefully – as things slow down, the traumas of Vietnam begin to emerge. “Short-Timer’s Blues” summarizes much of this, mentioning the ironic misery that comes along with the close of the war. Though the traumatic events eventually cease, their consequences soon emerge. “The routine [becomes] punctuated by moments of nonspecific terror” (391), the lack of continual combat and rigid structure providing the space for symptoms of trauma to manifest. “Being a short-timer made life difficult” (430). Rather than providing a source of excitement and comfort as it previously has, the end of deployment becomes anxiety inducing in itself. “Short-Timer’s Blues” closes the memoir with an unhappy ending – one that leaves Mason to cope with his merciless dreams and the ghosts of his service in Vietnam.

Mason’s division of *Chickenhawk* into these sections provides readers with a sort of map with which to guide themselves through the experiences chronicled in the memoir, from hopeful beginning to unhappy ending. Bookended by the prologue and epilogue, they encapsulate a story of unwilling growth, perverse acceptance, and trauma-ridden results. These sections also help break down the memoir into smaller, more digestible chunks – likely both for Mason and his readers. Mason’s time as a helicopter pilot splits into compartments, allowing for some simplification and objectification of the memories *Chickenhawk* contains. Throughout the memoir, these sections enhance Mason’s storytelling and make the work a powerful medium through which the traumas of the Vietnam War can be shared.

Photographs

The Vietnam War is widely known as the first televised and visible war. Much of this was due to technological change – cinematography and photography became dramatically more

convenient and shareable. Mason's account in *Chickenhawk* provides testament to this. He expresses interest in photography repeatedly, even returning to the University of Florida after his the end of his deployment in Vietnam to study art and photography (474). While media representation and recording appears throughout, most prevalent and most significant to Mason's memoir is his own photography. Photographs of Mason himself, his family, and his fellow servicemen fill the exact center of the book, working alongside the memoir at its halfway point. The photographs interrupt the written words, perhaps an indication of their significance in the memoir's contents. This centerpiece is directly framed by the discussion of *Chickenhawk's* title, an illustration of simultaneous cowardice and bravery through the lens of flight – “So what am I? A chicken or a hawk?” ‘You’re a chickenhawk’ (243). By this point in *Chickenhawk*, readers have attained a significant background. The photographs come after many of the chronicled events, emphasizing specific people and providing visual evidence of key objects – each accompanied by a brief descriptive caption. These photos, alongside several mentions of Mason's photography throughout the memoir, allow for further artistic expression as well as a form of further proof for the work's contents.

Photography, alongside literature, acts as a form of artistic expression. It provides another outlet, another medium through which stories may be shared. Mason takes advantage of this medium throughout *Chickenhawk*, paired with the written words of the memoir. These photographs were also taken far before the written words were created, an initial attempt to capture the realities of the war. This form of initial expression likely fed into the creation of the memoir itself, a starting point of capturing traumatic experience. This pairing indicates that photography on its own does not fully capture Mason's experiences, that only when paired with

several hundred pages of description can photographs begin to encapsulate the realities of the Vietnam War.

The photographs in this center section are printed in black-and-white. Almost all include people, Mason's wife and son alongside his fellow servicemen in the midst of Vietnam. Almost every photograph is accompanied by a caption. These captions provide readers with context like the names of those included within their square gray bounds, with the occasional witty quip from Mason's perspective. Many of these captions include the real names of his characters alongside their invented names. True to the personal nature of *Chickenhawk*, Mason himself appears most often throughout the photographs. The section opens with Patience, captioned "This is the picture of Patience I carried in Vietnam. She is twenty-two years old, my true love, and the mother of our son, Jack" (between 242 and 243). This first page of photos soon leads into war photos, from a labeled map of a camp to "[w]ashing out the blood at the end of a busy day," ultimately closing the section with a photo of the first Mason family Christmas after deployment ends (between 242 and 243). These photographs tell a story of their own, one that echoes the written contents of *Chickenhawk*.

While acting as a paired form of artistic expression, Mason's photographs also establish emphasis and reinforcement – providing "proof" for readers. Mason's included photos and continual references to photography give readers a further sense of reality. Vietnam becomes visible, his peers given real names and faces, even Mason's own name given a visible representation. Memoirs often read similarly to fiction, with detailed descriptions and flowing dialogue. Audiences may forget in the midst of reading that the words they have before them are a real account of events that occurred. Including these photographs enhances this fact, a reminder that the horrors within *Chickenhawk's* pages did happen. Names receive real faces (and real

names in the captions), places receive visual representation. Words on a page become something more, something real and tangible, reinforcing the truth of the memoir's contents for readers.

Photography appears throughout the memoir, though most notably in *Chickenhawk's* center. Mason mentions his own photography throughout and includes his own photos, an enhancement of the contents of the work. The photos mentioned and included provide another medium of expression, one that comes before the memoir's writing during the war. Their inclusion illustrates the persistence of the memories they represent. They supply an element of actuality and reality, a visual and almost tangible representation of the experiences of Vietnam. It likely also provides this sense of proof for Mason as the words of *Chickenhawk* do, an objective and externalized illustration of the war that now only lives in memory.

Dreams

As the war comes to an end, as Mason's service ends in 1966, the trauma of deployment slowly emerges. Vietnam's toll becomes visible even before Mason's return to America, beginning with a transfer to a different unit with less structure and more downtime. He develops a routine of waiting, one "punctuated by moments of nonspecific terror" (391). As symptoms of PTSD emerge, such as these moments of terror and hallucinations of explosions (416), Mason visits several doctors – but does not receive the official diagnosis until long after his return to the United States (474). This ultimately results in the end of his time as an Army instructor, but not the end of his deployment. While he describes many symptoms of PTSD throughout the close of *Chickenhawk*, Mason's most significant and poignant representation of the trauma of Vietnam comes through his dreams.

The emergence of Mason's PTSD symptoms do not immediately begin with the dreams, but these ultimately become the most detrimental and detailed symptom described. "Sleep no longer g[ives Mason] peace" by the thirteenth chapter of the memoir (434). Rather than acting as a refuge, an escape from reality, sleep brings back the memories of fear and violence back to the forefront of Mason's consciousness. Sleep becomes the Vietnamese enemy and the war itself. Mason escapes Vietnam, but dreams ensure that he does not escape his memories (434). Mason's descriptions of these dreams embodies the helplessness, the frustration of fighting against necessary function. One cannot live without sleep, but for Mason, sleep provides fear rather than refuge from reality.

Chickenhawk elaborates further on these dreams, providing gripping examples of their contents – versions of real memories that instill terrible fear and remove the refuge of sleep from Mason's grasp. These dreams are nearly indiscernible from the actual events themselves, the largest clues being the sudden shifts of scenes and people. The scenes feel real, even to the reader. "Twenty-one men lay trussed in a row, ropes at their ankles, hands bound under their backs," Mason begins, failing to clearly indicate the transition into dream from reality (434). He provides vivid detail as though chronicling the dream as it happens to him, illustrating "a wounded VC l[ying] on a stretcher" (435) and "[t]he wire[...] growing from the charred flesh of [a toddler's] tiny chest" (437). "This is wrong," Mason claims in his dream (437), both a recognition of the experience being a dream and a reflection of his changed attitudes towards the war and the military's actions. He knows the dream is happening, but must suffer through the terrifying, realistic, gruesome details of Vietnam over and over. The details and fear instilled by these dreams linger, making waking hours the refuge from sleep – "[he is] awake, after all, away

from all the dreams” (438). The Vietnam War lives on in Mason’s mind, in his memory, in his dreams, horrific experiences that do not go away.

Dreams represent the persistence of Mason’s war memories, ultimately resulting in a conflict of the war against home, against recovery and returning to the life he imagined for himself before. Before his return, “Patience[, his wife, his] son, Jack, and [his] family had become phantoms. They were dreams, too” (438). The life he hopes for, the people he cares for transform into the same things that torment Mason with fear and violence. Reality seems heavily shaken and unreliable, the good blending in with the bad, hope morphing into terror. Dreams and this reality no longer have clear boundaries, each merging with the other. Mason does not clearly note the shift from reality into dream, a further testament to the terrifying lack of distinction between the two traditionally clear concepts. Even leaving Vietnam, Mason observes, “seems like a dream” (462). Vietnam shifts the meaning of reality and experience, the dreams and other symptoms of PTSD twisting life into something much darker.

These dreams and Mason’s use of them throughout *Chickenhawk* illustrates the severity of Vietnam’s impact on the American veteran. The war does not stop happening, it shifts instead into dreams and memories that must be carried and coped with forever. These impede Mason’s return to the United States, his PTSD resulting in his characterization as a “50 percent disabled veteran” (474). No lasting physical injuries occur to Mason during deployment, but the damage persists. Dreams embody both the memories in their details and their induced emotional experiences, as well as their lasting impacts on Mason. *Chickenhawk* cleverly uses this symptom to explore the difficulties of PTSD and the inescapable memories made during deployment. The trauma emerges slowly, but once it does, it remains a powerful force of fear and damage for Mason.

Chickenhawk and Trauma Theory

Robert Mason's acclaimed memoir captures his personal account and personal traumas resulting from deployment in the Vietnam War as a young helicopter pilot for the United States Army. Mason employs several techniques throughout the written work, including many beyond the three discussed in this work. Through techniques such as these, Mason paints a powerful picture of his own service and likely finds a means of healing and coping through its creation. Through memoir, through writing and chronicling his own experiences, *Chickenhawk* provides a poignant example of trauma literature created by a Vietnam veteran. Like works such as *Matterhorn* and *The Things They Carried*, *Chickenhawk* participates in an examination of trauma in literature as "the experience of trauma, the urge to bear witness, and a sense of community" (Tal 217-218). *Chickenhawk* provides example for each of these aspects, an embodiment of the beginnings of catharsis and healing of the written chronicle of traumatic experience.

Tal's first feature of trauma literature, the experience of trauma, occurs throughout the entirety of *Chickenhawk*. From Mason's "first landing on Vietnamese soil" (Mason, 74) to his return (463), the experiences of war and traumatic events litter the pages. The initial experiences come through clouded innocence and lack of understanding – "How could you do this?" he thinks, seeing a young woman attempting to sell a dead infant (116). He faces death firsthand in its various horrifying forms. He watches wounded soldiers die in his helicopter as he flies rescue missions, "want[ing] to fly at a thousand miles an hour" to save them (186). Eventually the trauma becomes normal. "Ah," Mason thinks when he sees a man he thinks to be sleeping up close. "Not sleeping. Brains blown out." (304). These traumatic experiences fill the several hundred pages of the memoir, likely not even encompassing every one still in Mason's

memories. The experience of trauma occurs so often it nearly becomes continuous from *Chickenhawk*'s first word to its last.

Following the experience of trauma comes the urge to bear witness, a need to share traumatic experiences like those mentioned. The publication of *Chickenhawk* provides a strong example of this in itself, an urge fulfilled by writing and publishing a memoir that others may read and experience for themselves. The urge traces throughout the memoir itself as well, as soldiers share their experiences with one another as a means of coping with trauma. After transferring assignments and running into his previous group, he and his friends “s[it] around drinking coffee and telling war stories” (449). Even after leaving, the sense of community they hold still exists, the group reuniting to share their stories of trauma, to tell one another what they may not be able to tell anyone else. The urge to bear witness to traumatic experience ties the soldiers together, bringing a sense of community to the memoir and beyond it.

Through the urge to bear witness of the experience of trauma emerges a sense of community. Sharing traumas with one another fuels the formation and reinforcement of communities, a deep sense of connection forming between groups that share such traumas and memories with one another. The publication of *Chickenhawk* itself also establishes this. The memoir's publication reaches far wider audiences, from civilians born long after the end of the war to veterans that were there alongside Mason, experiencing the same horrors. This sense is further supported by Mason's published sequel – *Chickenhawk: Back in the World: Life After Vietnam* – a 1993 publication that expands upon Mason's readjustment in the United States. A sense of community emerges in *Chickenhawk*, one that Mason recognizes and seeks to expand and reinforce with the publication of his sequel.

Throughout Mason's memoir, a literature of trauma emerges. *Chickenhawk* is far more than a book to read, it is a tool by which Mason finds healing from the horrors he faces. This catharsis comes from the externalization of the war, from the community that forms from such externalization. "I have followed a pattern of behavior that is typical of many Vietnam veterans," he writes. "The funny thing is, I wasn't aware of the pattern until I wrote it down" (473). The creation and publication of *Chickenhawk*, of sharing the stories it contains, of having others read and understand alongside Mason, further adds to this healing. Tal's described features exist within and without the memoir's bounds, making the memoir a poignant example of trauma literature and of Vietnam War literature.

“The bad stuff never stops happening: it lives in its own dimension, replaying itself over and over.” – *The Things They Carried*, Tim O’Brien

The Vietnam War came to a close in 1975. Fifteen years later, in 1990, Tim O’Brien published *The Things They Carried*. While it resides among his previous works of Vietnam War literature, such as his autobiographical account *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* (1973) and his fictional anti-war novel *Going After Cacciato* (1978), *The Things They Carried* encapsulates the war in a uniquely powerful way. In this later work, O’Brien meshes fiction and reality together through metafiction and verisimilitude. “I’m forty-three years old, true,” he writes, “and I’m a writer now, and a long time ago I walked through Quang Ngai Province as a foot soldier. Almost everything else is invented. But it’s not a game. It’s a form” (O’Brien, 171). This form creates space for otherwise unmanageable tactics, allowing a remembered story to be told as real through fictitious events.

The Things They Carried tells many stories, but it mainly follows a fictionalized O’Brien and his time in the United States Army during his drafted service in Vietnam. The members of his platoon, Alpha Company – though recognized by the author as fictional – receive the author’s dedication before the book begins. Readers immediately step into a world where no concrete delineation exists between truth and fiction, where “[a] thing may happen and be a total lie; another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth” (80). *The Things They Carried* bridges the gaps of experience where works like *Matterhorn* and *Chickenhawk* may not. Metafiction and verisimilitude open doors to the benefits of both fiction and nonfiction memoir, filling spaces perhaps otherwise left empty by the limits of each medium. This “form,” as O’Brien describes, allows the stories of *The Things They Carried* to emerge and share experiences perhaps otherwise unexplainable.

O'Brien's work of metafiction and verisimilitude employs a variety of features throughout to achieve this unique realm of literary creation and to share the experiences Vietnam War. This thesis selects three of these features pertinent to the overlapping stories of *The Things They Carried* and its portrayal of such experiences. The first feature, emotions and literal experience, shifts the traditional focus of experience to something more tangible and accessible for readers. Unthinkable emotion becomes imaginable, actual sensations, providing audiences a gateway for understanding and empathy. The second, communicating the incommunicable, approaches trauma in what may be the closest one can get to its truest form. This strategy acknowledges and explores the failure of words, of communication, in sharing the traumas of the war. The final feature, merging fact and fiction, both embodies the unique genre of the literature and how it encompasses (or fails to encompass) O'Brien's memories of the war. The war becomes stories in *The Things They Carried*, stories that consciously evade boundaries to capture unthinkable experience. As with Marlantes's and Mason's novels, these three features do not capture the work's entirety, but provides a poignant representation of how the work employs literature to explore trauma.

Emotional Experience versus Literal Occurrence

In the heat of the moment, the decision made by a child to shout at their parents for grounding them may feel appropriate. The intense emotions of the child surrounding the situation warp logic into something different from the normal sense of reason. Feelings overtake reason, resulting in a stricter consequence that could have been avoided, had logic won over emotion. Every person can name a moment where intense emotions shifted their perception, changing their behavior and potentially their memory of the situation. While the experience of war to a

soldier clearly cannot compare to that of grounding to a child, emotion plays a significant role in both situations. While most of O'Brien's readers do not share his memories of the war, they may understand the power of emotions to warp experience. In combat, surrounded by threats, emotions run high. Perceptions change as feelings change, eliciting emotions and feelings that may greatly differ from fact. What literally happened does not necessarily match the actuality of what the soldier experienced.

O'Brien explores the duality of literal versus emotional experience throughout his collection, but most clearly does so throughout "The Man I Killed." This central vignette highlights O'Brien's own service and memories, differing somewhat from the rest of the short stories through the heavy focus on himself and his perceptions. Here, O'Brien talks of the image of a young Vietnamese war casualty, how "[h]is jaw was in his throat, his upper lip and teeth were gone, his one eye was shut, his other eye was a star-shaped hole" (118). Vivid details surround the young man for which O'Brien names the vignette. The narrator invents a story for the young man, how "[h]e had been born, maybe, in 1946 in the village of My Khe," humanizing the dead man out of strong feelings of guilt (119). He continuously uses "the man I killed" in reference to the body before him rather than an objective description (such as "the dead man"), embodying the burden of the event on the narrator (122). Emotion plays an important role in this, illustrating clearly the true impact of emotions on the narrator and on humanity in general. Guilt for killing this man, despite him being the enemy, eats away at O'Brien.

Despite the original claims that O'Brien "fuckin' trashed the fucker" in "The Man I Killed," the short story "Good Form" brings this back into question nearly a quarter of the book later (119). Here O'Brien claims that he "want[s his audience] to feel what [he] felt. [He] want[s them] to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth" (171). In this, he admits

that he “did not kill [the young man]. But [O’Brien] was present, you see, and [his] presence was guilt enough” (171). Significantly after reading “The Man I Killed”, the audience suddenly learns that the narrator’s recount does not communicate the actual happenings of the situation. Instead, it communicates a situation where experience and factual event differ dramatically. Though the narrator may not have killed the man, the event impacted him as though he had. The fact that he does not kill the man does not seem to matter: the experience of the man’s death nonetheless leaves its impact.

The emotions associated with such situations shift them into different experiences. Events such as the death of a young man impact one so greatly they feel the guilt and responsibility for something they did not do. This makes these situations and emotions tremendously difficult to communicate, a challenge O’Brien attempts to overcome throughout his short stories. What may literally happen may not appropriately reflect the experience of those involved, resulting in stories such as “The Man I Killed” to attempt to accurately convey that which seems beyond communication to those with no experience of such things. Reality blurs lines at the hands of emotional experiences, conscious rivaling against unconscious, leaving words empty and significant obstacles to overcome to effectively impart that which seems impossible to share.

Communicating the Incommunicable

Some experiences cannot fit within the natural confines of words, especially those with intense emotional impacts. Emotions often evade appropriate description. The word “sad” cannot accurately convey the grief of losing a loved one, the word “love” cannot convey the loyalty, attachment and caring towards one’s family. When the words that exist to explain emotions fail to do so, one must find ways to work around this barrier and communicate the incommunicable.

Other means of description take the place of more simplistic tactics, replacing “he felt sad” with entire situations that convey the true nature of this emotion. Many people have not served as soldiers in wartime and do not share such experiences with veterans, leaving a divide between the two. Communication bridges gaps, but when the subject evades the words meant to describe it, different tactics must take their place. O’Brien works with this throughout his vignettes, attempting to share what he faced despite the near impossibility of doing so.

Throughout all of *The Things They Carried*, O’Brien attempts to use different tactics to share his own experiences as well as his fellow soldiers’ in Vietnam, especially in “How to Tell a True War Story.” He declares that “[i]n many cases a true war story cannot be believed” and that “[i]n other cases you can’t even tell a true war story. Sometimes it’s just beyond telling” (68). When experience evades the thing that exists to contain it, alternative methods take their place. Stories convey messages through alternative means, fictionalizing things to communicate the overall idea best. O’Brien recounts a story as told by Mitchell Sanders, who later tells O’Brien that “[l]ast night, man, [he] had to make up a few things”, but that “it’s still true” (73). Though the story itself may not entirely have happened exactly as told, its message, the feelings it incited, may have. “The truths are contradictory” and impossible to generalize, leaving gaping holes in empty descriptions where most of the experience cannot fit into the description of the event itself (77). The truth changes to share itself best. Feeling overrules fact, making these stories difficult to share.

O’Brien attempts to capture these indescribable feelings through emotional stories that make sense to those that do not share his experiences. To illustrate Rat Kiley’s experience of the death of Curt Lemon, O’Brien tells about the vicious treatment of a baby water buffalo. When it does not want to eat the food offered to it, “Rat shrug[s,] step[s] back and sho[ots] it through the

right front knee” (75). The ruthless, vicious attacks on the innocent animal strike the hearts of O’Brien’s readers. Where they may not understand the feelings of losing friends in combat or may understand the justifications of such casualties, the senseless torture of an innocent animal almost universally strikes readers as wrong. For Rat Kiley “it [i]s a question of pain,” an externalization of the grief that cannot fit into the words of sadness (75). The aim of this “[i]sn’t to kill; it [i]s to hurt” (75). In the violence against this animal, the readers better understand some of the damages of war on those who fight them – as well as its innocent victims.

Communicating these emotions through alternative means such as violence against animals and fictionalized stories better captures the true experiences of such events. However, the question of the legitimacy of these messages arises. While the fictionalized work may better communicate the feelings that simple descriptions cannot share, can they truly capture the experience of such events? Does *The Things They Carried* truly elicit the same feelings in its readers as what soldiers experience in the midst of war? While these short stories may or may not succeed, perhaps they come close. Affect theory recognizes that “it is debatable whether [unconscious and conscious experiences] are really distinct, whether they can be experienced independently of each other, and which of them is “truest”— whatever that might mean—to who we are” (Figlerowicz, 5). This implies perhaps that these experiences and their sense of “truth” cannot fully be communicated without some form of unconscious experience. Perhaps O’Brien’s writing achieves this, in some form, making *The Things They Carried* a powerful tool through which readers may understand the terrors of the Vietnam War.

Merging Fact and Fiction

The Oxford English Dictionary defines a fact as “[a] thing that has really occurred or is actually the case; a thing certainly known to be a real occurrence or to represent the truth”, and fiction as “[t]he action of ‘feigning’ or inventing imaginary incidents, existences, states of things, etc., whether for the purpose of deception or otherwise.” Society values facts heavily, placing great value on truth and honesty, but the simple truth may not always tell the whole truth. Fiction as a literary genre often allows the exploration of deeper truths, of human nature and human experience. Fictionalizing often works hand in hand with the truth, shifting its meaning from the realm concrete facts to the abstract world of emotions and concepts. This brings in the concept of verisimilitude, previously defined here as the quality of appearing true – not necessarily the technical truth, but the truth in what may be a more accurate form. O’Brien works with this throughout his short stories, taking the “factual” truth and shaping it into something else to better communicate his own truths. The lines between fact and fiction blur in many situations, especially those so closely tied to the human experience and emotional responses.

O’Brien fills *The Things They Carried* with stories of pain, boredom, and countless other illustrations of war. Throughout these stories, fact and fiction work together to show that which cannot otherwise show. O’Brien claims that “[a] true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe” (74). Rather than focus on whether or not the facts of the story match what actually happened, the focus lies with illustrating the truth of the experience itself. “It comes down to gut instinct”, the innate human desire to understand and be understood (74). Facts and details cannot capture anything beyond the facts and details. They cannot show feeling, they cannot show impact. The fictionalization of events throughout the book “[i]s not a game. It’s a form” (171).

This use of verisimilitude – the tactic of the invention of events, the invention of details and people – allows for the expression of things that facts cannot wholly capture.

This form breaks truth down into two things: the “happening-truth” and the “story-truth” (171). The happening-truth of what actually, literally happened contains the basic facts of the event. The story-truth contains the emotions, the personal experiences beyond what the eyes see and the skin feels. “What stories can do, [O’Brien] guess[es], is make things present” (172). This metafictional form reflects on the power of storytelling and its influence on truth. Stories turn the facts into fiction, warping them into a different kind of true, from the literal to the experienced. “[I]t’s difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen,” blurring the divide between the black and white concepts of fiction and fact. Stories allow this divide to close through the changing of one to fit the other. Where statistics illustrate that millions died in the Vietnam War, O’Brien shows the impact of those deaths through stories. Readers see the grief of Rat Kiley after the death of his best friend. How “they were kids; they just didn’t know” (66). Facts generalize, fiction humanizes. Reflecting on this use of fiction through metafiction indicates this significance throughout the work, the importance of fiction and writing in communicating Vietnam.

As O’Brien shows through the impacts of his stories, “[t]o generalize about war is like generalizing about peace. Almost everything is true. Almost nothing is true” (77). As facts generalize, they cannot accurately show such a thing as war. War means memories and events that cannot fit within facts and numbers, that leave marks deeper than fact can contain. Fiction exists to share what simple facts do not, which O’Brien employs throughout his work. The happening-truth and the story-truth conflict, but both share the same story in different ways. Reflections upon this through metafiction further enhance this relationship. The message differs,

the experience differs, but they tell the same tale. Here, fact and fiction do not obey the dichotomies they otherwise embody. Here, they work together yet separately to communicate the incommunicable, to contain the uncontainable, to share things beyond sharing. O'Brien masterfully ties these two separate things together to capture his own truths, his own account of the Vietnam War.

Fear, grief, anger, hopelessness, boredom, joy, and every other emotion associated with the nature of war work their way throughout O'Brien's writing style. O'Brien slices apart words, rearranging them into mosaics of new ideas and new ways of communicating what seems impossible to do. Fiction meets fact, emotion separates from actual occurrence, what seems to happen differs from reality. O'Brien's mastery of language allows him to uniquely piece together portraits of things largely unshared otherwise. How does one truly represent war? How does one capture such a word into something so limiting? O'Brien manages to do so in a little over two hundred pages, tying a lifetime of feelings into a literal work that people can read and hold in the palm of their hands. Audiences who did not experience this war, who only learn of it from the facts, get much closer to understanding the actualities of this war through O'Brien's work. His words evoke emotions otherwise unexperienced and not understood in simplistic ways. He appeals to human instinct and consciousness. Suddenly a faraway event that must have been difficult for other people to comprehend appears immediate, happening now. As a writer, O'Brien can "save [someone's] life. Not [their] body – [their] life" (223). "[I]n a story [he] can steal [their] soul" (224). Life fills pages, immortalizing people and events. Fiction saves lives in impossible ways, bringing vibrancy to things long gone. While *The Things They Carried* captures a war, it also captures the importance of stories.

The Things They Carried and Trauma Theory

While O'Brien clearly dedicates *The Things They Carried* as a work of fiction, the experience it shares is truthful. Verisimilitude and metafiction allow one story to tell another, fiction becoming fact. O'Brien's work provides a unique example under the umbrella of trauma theory, evading the traditional bounds of literature and expression. Through literature, through verisimilitude and metafiction, through the act of writing itself, a Vietnam veteran tells his story. As noted previously, this thesis applies Tal's examination of trauma in literature as the product of "the experience of trauma, the urge to bear witness, and a sense of community" (Tal 217-218). *The Things They Carried* provides testament to the significance of each of these three aspects and to the use of writing as a means of catharsis and healing.

The experience of trauma, Tal's first component of trauma theory, traces throughout the entirety of O'Brien's work. O'Brien describes violence in graphic detail, in instances such as "The Man I Killed." These details repeat several times, stuck in the fictional O'Brien's thoughts. The jaw in the throat, the star shaped hole – these details stick in the minds of *The Things They Carried*'s readers as well, a chant of horror, violence, and fear. For "[t]he bad stuff never stops happening: it lives in its own dimension, replaying itself over and over" (O'Brien 31). O'Brien works to make his words contain his experiences, to share them with his audiences, as well as to separate them. "[T]he remembering makes it now," a testament to the persistence of traumatic experience (36). Even as a veteran, publishing two full decades after the end of the Vietnam War, the experiences continue. They do not fade or lessen, they do not lose their grip. Perhaps it is this continuation, this persistence, that feeds into creation of this written work and the urge to bear witness.

The urge to bear witness applies to the existence and creation of *The Things They Carried* in itself. The writing and publication of a book devoted to the experience of trauma provides testament to this urge and the importance of sharing such experiences. It also may be applied to the work's details – to the attention paid to emotion, to the exact details of the work's many stories. “But this too is true: stories can save us” (213). Stories memorialize, stories share. They make the past present, they objectify experience. The urge to create the stories of *The Things They Carried* traces throughout the book, a complicated thread of importance and healing. In bearing witness to the traumas of Vietnam, the work emerges – one that seeks to share what may not otherwise be shared.

From this urge to bear witness, a sense of community also forms. Bearing witness requires another to experience the events, to listen and understand. “The thing about a story is that you dream it as you tell it,” O’Brien explains, “hoping that others might dream along with you, and in this way memory and imagination and language combine to make spirits in the head. There is the illusion of aliveness” (218). The need for community emerges, a deep desire to have someone else understand, to be heard and accepted. Trauma is isolating, and an instinctual response to fight back against this isolation occurs. Writing and publishing a book, creating or adding to a space in literature, establishes a community. Audiences read the work, effectively dreaming alongside the author and taking part in the story within the pages. A community may already exist among Vietnam veterans, but this sense spills over onto a wider group – one filled by readers.

Storytelling provides a specialized tool with which to share one's experiences. O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* does so eloquently and poignantly, communicating the incommunicable through words and the evasion of convention. Trauma theory provides readers

and scholars a vital tool in understanding such works. “[T]he act of writing,” O’Brien writes, “led me through a swirl of memories that might otherwise have ended in paralysis or worse. By telling stories, you objectify your own experience. You separate it from yourself. You pin down certain truths. You make up others. You start sometimes with an incident that truly happened, like that night in the shit field, and you carry it forward by inventing incidents that did not in fact occur but that nonetheless help to clarify and explain” (152). Through writing, the trauma lessens. Through the appeals to each component of trauma theory, weight lifts. Writing provides healing, a powerful tool in coping with trauma – here, specifically for the veterans of the Vietnam War.

“I survived, but it’s not a happy ending” – The Literature of Vietnam Veterans and Trauma Studies

Karl Marlantes’s *Matterhorn* was published in 2009. Its pages contain a fictionalized account, but also an account of Marlantes’s deployment in Vietnam. The war returned with Marlantes, transforming memory into a story through invented characters and events. These invented characters and events became a novel – one of heroism and bravery, but also horrifying violence and fear. Several decades after the war’s end, *Matterhorn* reached publication, after several years of conflict with publishers fearing negative reception. Now, the novel is widely read and studied, regarded as a powerful example of Vietnam War literature. *Matterhorn* became a *New York Times* Bestseller, Marlantes’s chronicled traumas of an ignored war suddenly becoming a successful novel.

Mason’s *Chickenhawk* reached bookstores for the first time in 1983 and again most recently in 2005. Like Marlantes, Mason brought the war back with him after returning from deployment. Mason turned to memoir rather than fiction, telling his own story exactly as he remembered it, changing only the names of his peers. *Chickenhawk* does not shy away from detail or the realities of the war, giving voice to the experiences Mason struggles against. Like Marlantes’s novel, *Chickenhawk* became a national bestseller and now exists as a sort of “required reading” for those interested in flying helicopters as well as those wishing to read about the experience of the Vietnam War.

O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* reached publication in 1990, following some of his other works on the Vietnam War. O’Brien’s words follow suit of Marlantes’s and Mason’s, a written chronicle of his experience as an American soldier in the Vietnam War. The residual memories litter the pages, writing fed by experiences that words cannot fully capture. While not

the first example of O'Brien's Vietnam experience, it ranks almost universally as one of the most powerful works of Vietnam War literature in print. Named as one of the *New York Times's* Books of the Century, a Pulitzer Prize finalist, and recipient of several other awards, *The Things They Carried* tells an indisputably significant story to its audiences.

The works of the three authors selected here occupy a unique space in literature, sharing the experiences of the American Vietnam War veteran. This group, one largely ignored and even looked down upon, finds representation in the words and publications of these men. Each of these authors turned to writing, to an external chronicle of experience after their return from the Vietnam War. Each veteran, all suffering from PTSD, created and published literature of their traumas. While Marlantes, Mason, and O'Brien each approach their individual experiences in individual ways, significant features overlap and connect the three in powerful ways. Ultimately the thread of catharsis and healing through writing ties these stories together, a testament to the power of literature for both its readers and its creators.

Overlapping Techniques and Features

What connects different works of literature varies greatly. Techniques unite individual works as well as groups of works, from recurring themes to genre decisions. These authors unite clearly through their content of firsthand experience in the Vietnam War, but also demonstrate connection in less obvious ways. This implies the importance of these techniques beyond the individual works themselves, beyond the pages of one book and throughout the conversation of Vietnam in American literature – perhaps throughout an even wider scope of all trauma literature. Though the techniques and content of each selected work differ between authors, overlapping features connect the experiences of these three Vietnam veterans and the stories they

tell. Marlantes, Mason, and O'Brien demonstrate powerful literary choices throughout their individual works, as well as in the greater context of Vietnam War literature and trauma theory.

Overlapping genre choices exist between these authors' selected works, indicative of their significance in telling the stories they share. Both *The Things They Carried* and *Matterhorn* explore the medium of fiction, of using invented events and characters to tell personal stories. Fiction acts as a buffer between trauma and memory, changing the details for ones under the creative power of the author, helping to manage the unmanageable. Rather than actual events happening to the author directly, altered events occur to fictional people. A form of objectivity comes into play through this technique beyond the simple act of writing. Creativity makes the experiences other, turning them, in a way, into things that happen within the confines of a story. Fiction allows another thread of connection for readers as well, allowing them to experience stories rather than history. It also allows a means of embellishment and hyperbole, one that may be used without corrupting the actualities of any events. Marlantes and O'Brien employ fiction in different ways in their respective works, but the power of the genre resonates throughout each work.

Where Marlantes and O'Brien connect through use of fiction, Marlantes and Mason also connect through realism. These authors employ realism throughout – while not every event may be imaginable for audiences, every event takes place in a setting evoking total realism and honesty. No fantastic or unbelievable words fill either author's pages, an embodiment of the desire to share real experiences with audiences. Realism seems highly justified, avoiding stylizing that may appear derogatory towards experience. Realism conveys the actuality of Vietnam for these authors – for Marlantes, real events occur through the buffer of fiction and for Mason, these events simply occur on the pages as they occurred in his life. Readers directly

recognize that the events in these works, the stories told by these authors, actually happened (in some form or another). Perhaps realism itself becomes a management tool for authors, making a nearly surreal war into something more tangible for readers. Realistic experience reinforces the truth of the war, how it happened in history and how it happened to the soldiers that fought in it.

Mason and O'Brien, though they do not share realism, share the telling of their own stories. Each author uses his own name in his work, taking ownership of the experiences and stories he writes. The events chronicled in these authors books happen explicitly to them, to Vietnam veterans named Robert Mason and Tim O'Brien. *Chickenhawk* is Mason's story, and *The Things They Carried* is O'Brien's. This direct connection between author and writing does not allow readers the comfort of imagining the contents as foreign. It serves as a reminder – the Vietnam War was real, and the traumas of the war that torment the characters of the works torment their authors. This technique creates a sense of honesty, a hyperreality that does not let the fact of the war fade into the background through its elicitation of powerful emotional responses for readers. Each author uses this throughout their works, clearly sharing their own, real, and horrifying stories with their audiences.

Perhaps the most significant connection between these three works is their place in trauma theory. Marlantes, Mason, and O'Brien each clearly demonstrate all three aspects of Tal's noted features – the experience of trauma, the urge to bear witness, and the sense of community. Each work is riddled with traumatic experience, no author shying away from the horrors he faced during his deployment. Each author demonstrates an undeniable urge to bear witness to these experiences, turning to the written word to share what may otherwise never be heard. Each author also demonstrates a sense of community, demonstrating the comradery of each platoon and seeking to further expand community through the publication of the works themselves.

Trauma theory acts as a powerful tool through which readers may understand these authors, both individually and collectively.

These overlapping features illustrate the significance not only of each work individually, but of the selections discussed here and of the area of Vietnam War literature as a whole. Shared experience elicits shared techniques to communicate these experiences. The persistent traumas of Vietnam find their way through similar channels. Each author turned to writing and literature to find catharsis and healing from Vietnam's traumas. Each turned to published storytelling to communicate the horrors they faced, the horrors that haunt them long after the war's end. Though the war came to a close several decades ago, the memories these veterans have clearly persist, and the creation of literature provides some form of relief for them. While writing may not eradicate the damage of trauma, it provides an outlet for the expression, externalization, and communication of stories that need sharing.

Implications

Though the Vietnam War officially ended nearly five decades ago, its mark on history has yet to disappear. The average age of American soldiers was 19, making the average age of surviving veterans 63 years old (as of 2019). These veterans still survive, still experience the effects of their service in their daily lives. The repercussions of Vietnam resonate far beyond the war's official close, far beyond the country now known as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, far beyond the relatively brief deployments of the drafted and conscripted young men that left their country to fight. Science has yet to find a clinical cure for PTSD, estimated to affect 30% of Vietnam veterans in their lifetimes (How Common is PTSD in Veterans?). The effects of PTSD

are powerful and damaging, impacting its victims far beyond the traumatic experiences themselves.

The traumas of Vietnam still persist for American Vietnam veterans, carrying forward far and beyond deployment. Marlantes, Mason, and O'Brien signify this in their respective works, each author representing their traumas through writing and literature. These authors demonstrate the importance of their experiences while simultaneously demonstrating the importance of writing them down through their works. Vietnam becomes something else in the pages of a book, something separate and other that can be widely shared, closely read, and deeply understood by audiences. It acts as a powerful tool for healing, allowing both writers and readers to understand these experiences in a new way, allowing a new stance and a new approach to be taken against haunting memories.

Trauma theory provides a powerful tool with which to understand this use of literature as a form of healing and catharsis for its authors. This indication of healing may be an open, ongoing process, but these selected works indicate an important tool through which these authors may begin to heal from Vietnam's traumas. Understanding the experience of trauma, the urge felt to bear witness to it, and the sense of community that forms from these experiences resonates throughout the works of these veterans. United by literature and common traumatic experience, Marlantes, Mason, and O'Brien embody much of the power of trauma theory and its significance in illustrating the power of literature. It shows that writing is an experience beyond that of just the reader, that it connects and affects both parties in powerful ways. This speaks to a wider conversation of trauma literature, signifying the power of reading and writing in coping with such lasting experiences. Though writing cannot erase past trauma, it creates a path towards

healing for its creators. These examined works provide a poignant window through which to understand it while also speaking to the traumas of Vietnam veterans.

Appendix I: Vietnam War Literature and American History: A Timeline

1955: Graham Greene publishes The Quiet American.

Greene's novel follows the story of British journalist Thomas Fowler and the beginnings of the Vietnam War through his relationship with a young CIA agent, Alden Pyle. Greene explores the fall of French Colonialism in Vietnam, which ended in 1954, and the earliest seeds of American involvement.

1955: The Vietnam War begins.

With declining French Colonial influence, North Vietnam and South Vietnam begin warring against one another. The North Vietnamese government wished to reunite the two nations under its socialist government.

1962: The United States begins supporting the South Vietnamese.

With great controversy, the United States joins forces and begins providing support to the South Vietnamese against North Vietnam's armies. The draft occurs between 1964 and 1973, sending 2.2 million young American men to fight in the Vietnam War.

1965: The first United States Marines land in Vietnam.

After years of building tension and support, American troops land in Danang. Direct United States involvement fully begins.

1969: President Richard Nixon takes office.

After running on promises of ending American presence in Vietnam, the now-infamously remembered President Nixon takes office. America would officially withdraw support four years later.

1973: The United States withdraws American support in Vietnam.

After a decade of direct support for South Vietnam, America withdraws troops. Returning soldiers are met with protests and rejection. Minimal support is provided to veterans by the American government.

1974: Larry Heinemann publishes Close Quarters.

Heinemann publishes his fictional novel almost immediately after America ends support in Vietnam. His work is among the earliest pieces of Vietnam War literature. He shares the story of draftee Philip Dossier and his experience in the Vietnam War, a young man from Chicago sent to fight and die as soon as he graduates high school.

1975: The Vietnam War ends.

The South Vietnamese surrender to the North Vietnamese. Vietnam reunites, becoming the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. The war is there remembered as the War Against Americans to Save the Nation.

1977: President Jimmy Carter pardons Vietnam War draft dodgers.

Fulfilling a campaign promise, the newly inaugurated President Carter provides blanket amnesty to all draft dodgers of the Vietnam War. This action was met with widespread criticism by those who believed dodgers should not be pardoned as well as those seeing a failure to address dishonorable discharges and other avoidances (Glass).

1977: Philip Caputo publishes A Rumor of War.

Caputo's memoir is published in the wake of the war's official end. It tells the story of his own experiences in the Vietnam War and the sixteen-month tour that follows him far beyond his return home.

1977: Michael Herr publishes Dispatches.

Herr's personal account of his time as a journalist in Vietnam. It shares his face to face experiences with young American soldiers in the midst of the war and the daily terrors of survival he faced from the perspective of an outsider working to chronicle the first televised war in American history.

1978: James Webb publishes Fields of Fire.

Webb's fictional account of Vietnam tells the stories of three young American Marines in the midst of war. It focuses specifically on the An Hoa Basin in 1969, a snapshot of a much longer war that captures the sense (and senselessness) of Vietnam.

1982: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial opens in Washington, D.C.

The widely known and often visited Vietnam War Memorial first opens to the public in the capitol of the United States. Designed by Maya Linn, the wall displays nearly 60,000 names of American soldiers killed in the Vietnam War (The Vietnam Veterans Memorial).

1983: Robert Mason publishes Chickenhawk.

Mason's memoir of his time as a young Army helicopter pilot was first published in 1983, shortly after his sentencing for drug trafficking between the United States and Colombia. It has since been republished with additional author's notes, as well as a sequel entitled *Chickenhawk: Back in the World: Life After Vietnam*.

1990: Tim O'Brien publishes The Things They Carried.

O'Brien publishes what may be the most widely known work of Vietnam War literature 15 years following the war's official end. A collection of fictional vignettes, *The Things They Carried* shares the story of a fictional Tim O'Brien and his platoon.

1991: Harold Moore and Joseph Galloway publish We Were Soldiers Once... And Young: Ia Drang – The Battle That Changed the War in Vietnam.

General Harold Moore and journalist Joseph Galloway, two of the approximately 450 young Americans dropped in Ia Drang Valley in the midst of 2000 North Vietnamese soldiers, chronicle their own memories and the memories of hundreds of the battle's veterans. This work would become a major motion picture and has since become near-required reading for Marines.

1991: The Cold War officially ends.

After nearly five decades of tension and fear, the infamous Cold War comes to an end. The Iron Curtain lifts with the dissolution of the Soviet Union into separate republics through economic and political change throughout the Union.

1991: The Gulf War.

Led by a coalition of 34 United Nations member nations (including the United States), the Gulf War against Iraq begins and ends (Dates & Names of Conflicts).

2001: The War in Afghanistan begins.

The War in Afghanistan, or Operation Enduring Freedom, begins in 2001. The war continues today, 18 years later (Dates & Names of Conflicts).

2009: Karl Marlantes publishes Matterhorn.

After years of struggling with publishers, Marlantes's novel reaches publication. *Matterhorn's* fictional account of Vietnam emerges long after the end of Vietnam – with two American wars fought between.

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