A Farewell to Anthropocentrism in American Postbellum Prose:
A Reconsideration of Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*

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ABSTRACT: This article is driven by the urgency of the current ecological situation and humanity's role in its development. It explores the ways in which nature, humanity, and the relationship between the two are negotiated in Tim O'Brien's collection of short stories *The Things They Carried* (1990). Close readings of key passages show that through use of anthropomorphisms nature is portrayed as active rather than passive, and that the soldiers are, on the one hand, alienated and removed from US society and, on the other, embedded within nature. As a result, the human-nature dualism is exposed as a reductive, hierarchical, and separatist approach to a multifaceted, complex relation between interacting, equally valuable entities. The analysis of prevalent themes and devices— including anthropomorphisms, temporal non-linearity, decentering and fragmentation of the individual, and the omnipresence of death as well as the narrator's preoccupation with mortality— provides a blueprint for an ecocritical reading of postwar literature. This approach values nature in itself and generates an understanding of the ways in which the anthropocentric worldview prevalent in the Western world encourages a misinformed and harmful attitude towards nature.

KEYWORDS: Ecocriticism; Anthropocentrism; Postmodernism; Postbellum; Tim O'Brien; Vietnam War

A Part Of, Apart From

The predominant belief within Western culture is that humans are exceptionally and essentially different from nature. According to Melinda H. Benson, "[n]ew materialism challenges a mechanistic view of reality," while "[t]he *old* materialism that currently dominates Western thought […] prescribes to the deterministic, mechanistic view of matter created during the Enlightenment […] grounded in Newtonian physics and Cartesian epistemology" (257). Since "[t]he old materialist understanding of agency ascribes it [agency] as something that belongs only to humans" (Benson 259), it supports the idea of human exceptionalism. This type of thinking has facilitated an anthropocentric worldview within Western culture that posits humans not only as *apart from*—instead of *part of*— nature but as standing outside and above nature. Arne Naess states that "[t]he attempt to ignore our dependence and to establish a master-slave role has contributed to the alienation of man from himself" ("The Shallow and the Deep" 96). Building upon this, anthropocentrism can be understood as inherently unnatural. Human-centeredness reinforces the nature-culture dichotomy, as well as the hierarchy therein that places humans above nature, removes humans from nature and, as a consequence, removes humans from themselves as an inextricable part of nature. Amongst other factors, increased

awareness of anthropogenic climate change has aided in exposing anthropocentrism[1] as fundamentally flawed and has facilitated a more ecocentric worldview. By drawing on deep ecology as "a way of thinking about environmental problems that attacks them from the roots, i.e. the way they can be seen as symptoms of the deepest ills of our present society" and "a way of rethinking the relationship of humanity and/in nature" (Rothenberg 185), we will be able to reconsider the ways in which we act and interact in, upon, and with our environment. Therefore, considering the unifying aims of the diverse field of new materialism, which "represent[s] a move away from the centrality of the human and toward a more complex and relational perspective" and "ontological reconceptualization[s] of the material world" (Benson 253), humans are not stripped of their role as actors but are denied their primacy over the nonhuman.

On that basis, the following ecocritical analysis of Tim O'Brien's collection of linked short stories *The Things They Carried* (1990) will demonstrate the ways in which nature, culture, and the relationship between the two are negotiated and how the text challenges the traditional dualistic understanding of nature and culture. As a postmodern narrative, *The Things They Carried* portrays a loss of unity in terms of identity and temporal linearity. That, along with the work's fragmented form and characters, and the inescapability the narrator and the characters deal with, complements its postbellum characteristics. The postmodern devices of fragmentation and decentering are especially well suited to convey the narrative's archetypal postwar themes of alienation and estrangement, as well as the chaos that governs the war. Moreover, decentering goes hand in hand with the debunking of dualisms, as hierarchies are diminished and/or reversed as a consequence of the loss of a clear center or basis, resulting from the repeated challenging of the Western anthropocentric worldview. One of the key factors in maintaining the nature-human dichotomy is the "tendency to separate human history […] from natural history" (Chakrabarty 201). By denying humans primacy over nature, negating the notion of human exceptionalism, and decentering the human, the collection prompts a renegotiation of the human-nature relationship. Thus, in line with growing ecological awareness and increased acknowledgment of the influence human activities have on the planet, and by using well-established ecocritical insights to re-read postmodern postwar literature,[2] this distinction—

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[1] In its common usage, anthropocentrism denotes a worldview in which humans are considered morally more important than the nonhuman, whereas ecocentrism emphasizes the moral importance of a natural/ecological whole (cf. Samuelsson 628; Jamieson 149).

[2] Postmodern texts are characterized by a loss of center and unity—in form and content—as they "challenge narrative singularity and unity in the name of multiplicity and disparity" and "fragment or at least render unstable the traditional unified identity or subjectivity of character" (Hutcheon 90). The key features of postmodern literature include, but are not limited to, a lack of temporal unity, pastiche, paranoia, fragmentation, decentering (cf. Lewis 124-29), irony (cf. Hutcheon 90), and inescapability, "the shibboleth of all postmodern doctrine" (Limon 129). Postwar or postbellum literature denotes, as the terms suggest, literature written in the time following a war and "for the most part, they do not celebrate war" (Herzog 6). Throughout the history of war literature, characteristic elements include estrangement (cf. Limon 6), "fear, courage, cowardice, heroism, camaraderie, survival, brutality, helplessness, alienation, and nostalgia for combat" (Herzog 32).

between the human and nature—and the binary understanding of the nature-culture relationship is exposed as an oversimplification of a complex interrelation.

The Things They Carried consists of twenty-two short stories—twelve of which provide the material for the following analysis—based on the author's experiences as a soldier in the Vietnam War. The stories are narrated in the first- and omniscient third-person perspective of a soldier who shares the author's name.[3] The time of narration can be dated to approximately twenty years after the end of the Vietnam War, but the narrative deals with the narrator's and his fellow soldiers' lives before, during, and after the war. Set in the United States and Vietnam, the stories are not ordered chronologically and even the individual stories move fluidly between past and present as memories interlace to create a sense of non-linearity. In doing so, the stories address not only the horrors of the war itself but the resulting psychological trauma and the soldiers' struggle to regain footing within US society in the war's aftermath.[4]

The time frame that encompasses both the Vietnam War and the publication of *The Things They Carried*, namely the second half of the twentieth century, coincides with significant milestones reached particularly in the field of environmental research and a meaningful increase in public awareness of the extent of the anthropogenic influence on the planet's ecology. These developments sparked considerations not only concerning the individual's position within society and humanity as a whole but also relating to humanity's position on the planet since acknowledging the role of humans within the greater context of climate change demands we "reimagine humanity […], not just as a biological but also a geological force" (Nixon). This rings especially true in regard to the mid- to late twentieth century often referred to as "the 'Great Acceleration'" (Hibbard et al. 342) when the magnitude and rate at which human action impacted the environment increased alarmingly.[5]

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[3] Given the autofictional nature of *The Things They Carried* and since the author and narrator share the same name—either through self-designation or referred to in direct speech as Tim, Timmy, Tim O'Brien, or O'Brien in multiple stories—it is important to clearly distinguish between the two. Therefore, the narrator will be designated as such or referred to by his first name Tim. Though *The Things They Carried* contains autobiographical elements, it was explicitly published as "a work of fiction." Regarding the focalization, in "The Things They Carried," for instance, the narrator's omniscience arises in the way he has insight into the characters' thoughts and feelings, such as when he talks about fellow soldier Kiowa: "He liked hearing the sounds of night. Even his fatigue, it felt fine […]. He enjoyed not being dead. Lying there, Kiowa admired Lieutenant Jimmy Cross's capacity for grief" (18).

[4] Studies have shown that around half of all Vietnam veterans suffered a psychological trauma, which we refer to today as PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) (cf. Herzog 162). "Bearing physical and psychological scars, exhilaration mixed with guilt at surviving the war, and memories of their war experiences, these Vietnam survivors […] often encounter a hostile or indifferent public; […] feel alienated from the civilian world" (Herzog 161). One example of this can be found in the story "Notes" in *The Things They Carried*, where the narrator recounts the suicide of his former comrade Norman Bowker, around whom the preceding story "Speaking of Courage" is centered. He recalls a letter he received from Bowker, in which he "described the problem of finding a meaningful use for his life after the war" (177) and a note from Bowker's mother informing him of his suicide (181).

[5] Wars in particular emphasize the negative aspects of human influence on the planet: "The destructive side of this human capacity has become manifest in two world wars and countless other conflicts, and it is encapsulated in the technical ability to wage a global nuclear war" (Oldfield et al. 5); this ability is

The negotiation of the human-nature relationship in *The Things They Carried* is most noticeable in occurrences of anthropomorphisms, the temporal non-linearity of the stories, the omnipresence of death, and comparisons, as well as explicit juxtapositions and interactions between humans and the nonhuman resulting in the debunking of the human-nature dualism. As a postmodern text, its use of metafictional elements and real place names and dates "blur the distinctions among author, narrator, and protagonist, and between fact and fiction" (Vernon 171). In addition, typical of war literature, the ways in which the metafictional passages "constantly advertise[…] [their] own inadequacy" (McLoughlin 15) raises questions concerning postmodern war literature's representational ability as the text repeatedly undermines its own truths. As Robin Silbergleid deduces, "it is precisely this liminal space—between fiction and nonfiction—that allows the text to do its critical work" (130). Analogously, the text's portrayal of the human-nature relationship and of the human as not the opposite of nature but instead as occupying a liminal space allows for a critical reconsideration.

In this article, I aim to show the ways in which the representation of the human-nature relationship in *The Things They Carried* challenges the Western anthropocentric dualism. Using an ecocritical lens, I will consider nature and humanity as "interwoven rather than as separate sides of a dualistic construct" (Wallace and Armbruster 4) and thus these concepts will be regarded as not entirely independent but instead as interacting and to a certain degree, codependent entities across the short stories. For James Lovelock, Gaia—our Earth System—is defined by a complex interplay of organisms working together and comprising an overarching living system. This, in correspondence with his understanding of the superorganism as "something that includes individual organisms but exists as a recognizable entity" (133), constituted an important step away from anthropocentrism. Further inspired by the eight basic principles of deep ecology as formulated by Arne Naess and George Sessions, this article proposes an understanding of nature's value as intrinsic, that is to say it exists "independent of the usefulness of the non-human world for human purposes" ("The Deep Ecology Movement" 37); the acknowledgment of that value is dependent upon a rejection of the anthropocentric axioms at the root of Western thought.

Accordingly, this article will exemplify how reading postwar literature from an ecocritical standpoint may yield important insights concerning the predominant view within the Western world about one's attitude towards nature. As a literary-critical approach, ecocriticism explores the complex relationship between nature and culture within literature. The ecocritical rejection of dualisms and anthropocentrism goes hand in hand with its rejection of readings that place "human concerns above those of other species" (Hiltner 2). The challenge is to find a more ecocentric approach to postmodern postwar literature that

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accompanied by "an everpresent fear that they [wars incl. the Vietnam War] might escalate to nuclear conflict" (Roper 4). Postwar literature of that time reflects the alienation caused by the renegotiation of humanity's role in the world, one's own contribution or responsibility—as an individual and as part of society/humanity—, and the anxiety evoked by the realization of humanity's capabilities for destruction.

values nature in itself instead of denouncing its autonomy and agency by reading it as mere symbol, setting, or backdrop. For instance, in her analysis of "How to Tell a True War Story" from *The Things They Carried,* Josephine Donovan reads the torture and murder of a baby water buffalo by soldier Rat Kiley following his best friend's death as a way "to dramatize human feelings about or behavior toward other humans" (208). This type of reading posits humans as subjects and nature as mere object. Though Donovan's interpretation is valid, it devalues the water buffalo as nothing but a stylistic device. Donovan's symbolic reading of the scene is thus a paradigmatic display of the misconception of humans and nature as separate and the former as privileged over the latter; it also exhibits how humans' disregard for the nonhuman facilitates the infliction of violence on nature and is exemplary of human behavior towards nature overall.[6] Therefore, when Donovan concludes that literature "is a human activity but insofar as it aspires to register the realities of and communications with other species it needs to expand its repertoire beyond conventional fictional devices" (214), one could add that an expansion of the ways in which nature is approached in postwar literature will also shed light onto previously overlooked dimensions of well-studied texts.

Since war literature is ostensibly centered on human-made conflict as its temporal, spatial, and narrative framework, an interesting tension occurs when the narrative fails to posit nature solely as passive backdrop but as an affected, often active subject. As Tobey C. Herzog points out, the Vietnam War "was not only fought against the enemy soldier; it was also waged against the elements—heat, rain, and cold; against the land" (50). Thus, the analytic focus needs to shift from human affairs to the effects human actions have on the environment by acknowledging the embeddedness of humans in their natural environment. After all, in "the Vietnam War, the United States military declared war not just on the Vietnamese peoples, but also on nature itself" (Oatsvall 427). As will become increasingly apparent throughout the analysis, the environment—or nature—in *The Things They Carried* is posited as an actor that is unmistakably affected by and interacts with humans.

Consequently, the following ecocritical analysis of O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* will serve as an example of an ecocentric reading of postwar literature that values nature in itself. My analysis of the short story collection will reveal how reading some of the predominant themes and devices of the stories from an ecocritically informed perspective generates a conception of the human-nature relationship that focuses on their interaction

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[6] This is especially true in the case of the Vietnam War which "saw the first full-scale use of herbicides in warfare" (Palmer 172). The purpose of the herbicide known as Agent Orange, for instance, was "aimed at the defoliation of mangroves and forests, and [the] destruction of crops and their distribution so as to remove aerial cover and food supplies" (172). Yet, the effects were miscalculated in military *and* environmental terms. The efficacy from a military perspective was questionable at best (cf. Palmer 172; Oatsvall 427-28) and the inevitable environmental destruction that followed as a direct result was unanticipated (cf. Oatsvall 427-28), as were the human costs. While scientists have confirmed a broad range of possible human health effects that may occur following the exposure to the dioxin contained in Agent Orange, studies have often slighted the topic of the detrimental effects the distribution of the herbicide has had on the humans and animals actually living in the affected areas; instead they have focused largely on US veterans (cf. Palmer 174; Franklin 34).

and interconnectedness rather than their differences and imposed hierarchical structures. Thus, the definitions of these concepts do not solely depend on their distinctions but on their similarities and their relation to each other. First, I will illustrate the ways in which anthropomorphisms enable nature and thus allow for a reading of nature as an active, rather than a passive entity. Second, I will demonstrate the ways in which the text implies the characters' removal from US society, evoked most ostensibly through non-linear temporality. I will then move on to the ways in which the decentering of the human and the omnipresence of death within the stories render binary distinctions unstable and undermine the traditional Western assumption of human exceptionalism and anthropological difference. Thereby, the stories challenge the idea of the human and nonhuman as separable entities and, at the same time, embed humans within nature. Finally, I close with the ways in which all of these aspects culminate into a portrayal of nature, humans, and the human-nature relationship as one defined by interconnection and interaction. In conclusion, the analysis will underline the ways in which ecocritical (re-)readings of postwar literature may function as an important building block for a new eco- rather than anthropocentric worldview.

1. Agency through Anthropomorphism

Reinforcing interconnectedness and equality represents one of the ways in which the anthropocentric differentiation between the human and the nonhuman and its resulting dichotomous mindset is challenged in *The Things They Carried*: "The morning came up wet and blurry. Everything seemed part of everything else, the fog and Martha and the deepening rain" (23). In this excerpt from the title story "The Things They Carried," the narrator speaks a truth that today, thirty years after publication, holds even more relevance; in light of the ecological crisis we find ourselves in today, the interconnectedness and interdependence between nature and culture have become an undeniable truth, as we have reached a point in our planet's history where "humans […] have become a geological agent on the planet" (Chakrabarty 209). The narrator's explicit observation of the fact that, to him, it seemed as if everything was linked, establishes a perspective characterized by connection. It is further underlined in the implicit ascription of agency in the first sentence of the quote, where the active voice is used to describe the advance of morning. This anthropomorphism serves to posit the nonhuman morning as an actor rather than mere background or setting.

Initially, the term 'anthropomorphism' may seem inherently anthropocentric as it denotes the attribution of human characteristics or activities to the nonhuman. The presupposition is that actions are teleological and can therefore only be performed by humans and the only way in which agency can be ascribed to nonhuman entities would be through human features. However, as Bruno Latour argues in "Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene," rather than "always pointing out the danger of 'anthropomorphizing' natural entities, we should be just as wary of avoiding the oddity of 'phusimorphizing' them, that is, of giving

them the shape of objects defined only by their causal antecedents" (11). The issue, then, is not anthropomorphizing entities as such, since anthropomorphisms add depth to entities that are usually perceived as one-dimensional. Thus, it may be worth "running the risks associated with anthropomorphizing (superstition, the divinization of nature, romanticism) because it, oddly enough, works against anthropocentrism" (Bennett 120) since it creates a link between the human and the nonhuman, placing them on equal footing. Instead, the problem lies in the predominant definition of anthropomorphism that presupposes an artificial and outdated divide between nature and culture and suggests a fundamental difference between humans and the nonhuman in regard to their actions. As Timothy Clark writes, "the supposed dichotomy of nature and culture is frequently used to police lines of demarcation between 'the animal' and 'the human,' with often fragile distinctions being made between action governed by mere (animal) instinct on the one hand as opposed to full (human) intention on the other" (32). If the actions and features attributed to the nonhuman through anthropomorphizing were not considered exclusively human, the term anthropomorphism would become obsolete. Understanding that agency is not solely reserved for humans but rather a capability of the human and the nonhuman—as proposed, for example, by Actor-Network Theory (ANT) where "*any thing* that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference is an actor" (Latour, *Reassembling the Social* 71)—allows anthropomorphisms to function as enablers of nature. "From an ANT perspective, rather than being passive resources at the disposal of humans, nonhumans are active, vibrant agents that also exert power" (Dwiartama and Rosin). Therefore, putting emphasis on the way in which anthropomorphisms ascribe agency to the nonhuman facilitates an ecocentric point of view. This approach allows detection of non-dualistic conceptions of the human-nature relationship as represented in *The Things They Carried*. Nature's active role in the above-cited excerpt posits nature not as opposite to the human but as an equally valuable actor in the short story collection.

The Things They Carried presents an abundance of instances in which anthropomorphisms aid in conceiving of nature as an active entity, from the advance of morning cited above to trees and the night in the following statements: "The trees are alive. The grass, the soil—everything. All around you things are purely living, and you among them, and the aliveness makes you tremble" (87); "Like the night had its own voice […] you'd swear you were walking through some soft black protoplasm, Vietnam, the blood and the flesh" (249). In this excerpt from "Night Life" Mitchell Sanders, one of the soldiers in Tim's company, tells the latter about the events leading up to a fellow soldier's exit from the war. His recognition of the aliveness of the environment, the fact that as humans they are within or even part of that environment with the reference to "protoplasm" suggests an understanding of humans and nature akin to Lovelock's notion of the Earth System. By allowing the nonhuman to appear as speaking and therefore active and alive, anthropomorphisms aid in establishing nature and humans as equally active subjects.

In her analysis of O'Brien's work, Rosalind Poppleton-Pritchard concludes that the way in which the environment seemingly fights back results in "a deep affiliation between the foot soldiers and the natural world" (84). Her assessment of the interplay between the human and the nonhuman in *The Things They Carried* is decidedly ecocentric in that she insists that "the land itself retains a dominant position" (85). She draws the conclusion that the author "reflects upon the ideas of the West and the very forces that drive individuals to cause such devastation" (92). Taking this a step further, then, the land's dominant position, which is reinforced through anthropomorphisms, such as the previously mentioned appearances of nature as active and alive, challenges the traditional conception of nature as separate from and subordinate to culture. When Mitchell Sanders attributes language to the nonhuman ("All these different voices. Not human voices, though. Because it's the mountains. Follow me? The rock—it's *talking*. And the fog, too, and the grass and the goddamn mongooses. Everything talks. […] The whole country. Vietnam. The place talks" [81-82]), he provides, according to Poppleton-Pritchard, "a mirror image through which the soldiers may recognise themselves in the land" (83), embedding them as humans within the larger context of nature. Thus, nature's agency is evoked not only when anthropomorphisms are employed to posit the human and the nonhuman as adversaries but also—or especially—when these anthropomorphisms lead to the recognition of the similarities between and the embeddedness of humans within nature, emphasizing interconnectedness and allowing for interaction on equal footing.

2. Temporal Idiosyncrasies—Alienation from Society

Reading anthropomorphisms as enabling rather than devaluing nature, then, allows for the acknowledgment of nature's agency and its active role within *The Things They Carried*. In addition, recognizing the agency of nature and embracing the similarities—rather than accentuating the differences—between the human and the nonhuman, leads to a revaluation of the fundamental assumptions of Western thinking by challenging the idea of human primacy. Another way in which this renegotiation is triggered is through the soldiers' alienation from US society—the cultural context within which and according to whose principles and values they were raised—emerging most ostensibly in the lack of temporal linearity within the stories. There is no overarching linear time frame within the collection; instead many stories oscillate between different points in the narrated past and the narrating present. For example, in "The Lives of the Dead" Tim's narration moves back and forth between the deaths of his childhood girlfriend in 1956 and of soldier Ted Lavender in 1969 as well as the narrating present in 1990:

> So I followed her down to the frozen pond. […]
> And then it becomes 1990. I'm forty-three years old, and a writer now, still dreaming Linda alive in exactly the same way. […] I loved her and then she died. And yet right here, in the spell of memory and imagination, I can still see her as if through ice, as if I'm gazing into some other world, a place where there are no brain tumors and no

> funeral homes, where there are no bodies at all. I can see Kiowa, too, and Ted Lavender and Curt Lemon […]. (273)

These events from different moments in Tim's life blend together in his mind and within the narrative of this story. Towards the end, there is barely any separation between these different points in time and storytelling is established as a way of transcending temporal boundaries.

Tim's personal experience of temporal displacement is also beautifully registered in the following excerpt from "On the Rainy River" in which he, still in the United States, has been drafted and is contemplating desertion. He recounts being on a boating trip and feeling as if his life is moving away from him: "My whole life seemed to spill out into the river, swirling away from me, everything I had ever wanted to be. I couldn't get my breath; I couldn't stay afloat; I couldn't tell which way to swim. A hallucination, I suppose, but it was as real as anything I would ever feel" (60). This quote functions as a sort of prelude to Tim's experiences in Vietnam. While the sensation of his life floating away from him on the river felt real at the time, though empirically speaking it was not, the war, which is real, often feels unreal. Thus, this excerpt demonstrates Tim feeling connected to the natural world around him as he uses the river as a metaphor for the feeling of loss of time and reality the war would bring to bear on him. It juxtaposes imagination and reality in a way that implies the two are not clearly opposable as the hallucination, despite his self-awareness, feels as real as some of his impending experiences. With the conditional formulation "anything I *would* ever feel" (60, emphasis added) Tim anticipates the hallucinatory semblance of his war experience, which is evoked by the way in which he and his fellow soldiers perceive time and reality during the war.

The temporal idiosyncrasy that characterizes the war, then, can be observed in the way that the majority of the "The Things They Carried" is temporally situated in relation to the death of Lavender. The soldier's death is used as a temporal marker ten times throughout the story, in phrases such as "Before Lavender died there were 17 men in the platoon" (11), "On the morning after Ted Lavender died" (22), or "In April, for instance, when Ted Lavender was shot" (5). Similar to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, which functions as a fixed temporal reference point in the Julian and Gregorian calendars—hence BC and AD—Lavender's death appears as a prevalent temporal orientation, functioning as a fixed reference point in the decentered, chaotic world of the war. Lavender's death is also used as a temporal marker in "Love" and "The Lives of the Dead," the second and the last stories in the collection respectively, thus functioning as a temporal frame for *The Things They Carried* as a whole. While, as Timothy Morton put it in *Hyperobjects*, our "sense of being 'in' a time and of inhabiting a 'place' depends on forms of regularity" (69), regularity is not a characteristic of war. Neither is it a characteristic of postmodern literature, such as *The Things They Carried*, which is often marked by fragmentation, decentering, and a lack of temporal unity instead (cf. Lewis 124-29). The implicit suggestion in *The Things They Carried* overall is that in combat, time has a different meaning: "The bad stuff never stops happening: it lives in its

own dimension, replaying itself over and over" (36) and, therefore, demands an approach that differs from the soldiers' learned understanding of time.

Within the context of war, the soldiers find themselves in an environment decidedly different from their US home; the use of a character's death as temporal reference point is one example of the ways in which Tim struggles to make sense of this different reality by familiar standards. For the soldiers, time is no longer simply definable by a calendar or a clock as the horror of war seemingly takes place "in its own dimension," which could allude to both a temporally and/or spatially removed dimension. This demands a different point of reference and thus emphasizes the soldiers' feelings of displacement from society. Losing the rhythm and regularity of civilian life to the disordered world of the war throws their senses off kilter, and as they increasingly lose touch with US society, the ties connecting them with the world they left behind and reality overall are increasingly strained. Tim accentuates this, for example, in "Night Life," where he states, "The long night marches turned their minds upside down; all the rhythms were wrong. Always a lost sensation […] no sense of place or direction" (249). This confusion, due to chaos and estrangement, even goes as far as causing a comrade like Azar to rethink reality and their place within it: "'What's real?' he said. 'Eight months in fantasyland, it tends to blur the line. Honest to God, I sometimes can't remember what real *is*'" (231). In this excerpt, Azar refers to Vietnam as "fantasyland"—a paraphrase of the narrator's own description of the events in Vietnam as seemingly inhabiting their own dimension—reiterating the severance from reality the soldiers feel as they fail to comprehend their environment according to familiar conceptions and classifications. Thus, their experience of war is characterized by a blurring of the line between what is experienced as real and what is not, a point that is reiterated throughout the work. The war takes the soldiers out of their familiar context, severs their connection to and distances them from US society. Tim's cognition of his hallucination on the river, pre-deployment, foreshadows the feeling he and Azar later describe; the fact that a hallucination—of which Tim is aware—feels as real as any other experience he would have suggests that in the war, even reality feels somewhat hallucinatory.

The disengagement from American society that Tim and his comrades experience is especially common among veterans, who "feel alienated from the civilian world" (Herzog 161). Tim and his comrades struggle to unite their culturally mediated knowledge and their combat experience: "There is no clarity. Everything swirls. The old rules are no longer binding, the old truths no longer true" (88). Thus, these examples show the ways in which the soldiers struggle to make sense of the alienating environment of the Vietnam War with the cultural constructs governing their understanding that were established by a society they no longer feel connected to. This foreshadows the larger issue Dipesh Chakrabarty elucidates in stating that human and natural history have been conceived of as separate for far too long (201), which is displayed here in a nutshell: human understanding is based on cultural—i.e. human—constructs and while our linear, yet limiting, conception of time may suffice to bring segments of linear human history into order, it may not suffice to describe

larger contexts such as planetary time or the sensation of chaos and irregularity that characterizes wartime experiences. Thus, reflecting on the soldier's struggle in Vietnam is emblematic of the human struggle to render reality comprehensible.

Consequently, the loss of linear time depicted through a lack of chronological order—in the work overall as well as within the majority of the stories—and the narrator's and characters' struggles to comprehend the chaos of war according to conceptions derived from the ordered civilian world they feel removed from, results in a complex entanglement of past, present, reality, and fiction. The stories distance the soldiers from US society—as well as the soldiers' conception of the world according to their socially determined Western perspective—and oscillate between past and present. Thus, the soldiers are alienated from a world strictly determined by (US) culture. However, as will be elaborated in the following chapter, they are inscribed and embedded within the broader context of the natural world as a system encompassing the human *and* the nonhuman. In doing so, the stories establish a notion of the human that is irreconcilable with the traditional nature-culture binary.

3. Decentering, Death and Debunking Dualisms—Embedding Within Nature

The decentering of the human that automatically occurs when aiming to overcome anthropocentrism and its corollary assumption that humans are the apex of creation is central to ecocriticism and, at the same time, an imperative precondition of a more ecocentric worldview. In *The Things They Carried*, decentering is most overtly conveyed through the characters' experience of alienation. It is also closely related to the devaluing of the individual in the context of war, "the primacy of duty and official role over personality" (Pitcher 73). This may appear implicitly—for instance in the multiperspectivity of works such as James Webb's Vietnam War novel *Fields of Fire* (1969) or William March's World War I novel *Company K* (1933)—or explicitly, as in the following excerpt from *The Things They Carried*: "The filth seemed to erase identities, transforming the men into identical copies of a single soldier, which was exactly how Jimmy Cross had been trained to treat them, as interchangeable units of command" (186). This erasure of the individual raises questions of what it means to be a human being as part of a society, as well as what it means to be human—rather than nonhuman—in the context of nature. Within the framework of the Vietnam War, this erasure is especially problematic. Due to the fact that one of the characteristics of the Vietnam War was the "soldier's individual entrance and exit from a military unit" (Herzog 54), integration and finding alignment among the company was not easy. While soldiers are expected to act as a unit, this strategy impeded the soldiers' ability to do so, resulting in an amplification of sentiments of alienation, insignificance, and isolation among the soldiers (cf. Herzog 54). This feeling is evoked in the excerpt above such that war is described as erasing individual identity. This focal shift away from the individual initiates a renegotiation of the anthropocentric worldview motivated by the realization that humans are not exceptional and, especially, that individual human concerns are insignificant in the grand scheme of war. That, in turn, is symbolic of the ways in which human concerns

measure on larger scales, such as that of planetary time, because the timespan inhabited by humans is an infinitesimal segment.

Since the stories suggest a conception of humans as contextually bound and therefore not easily separable from their environment—whether that is the culturally constructed context of society or that of nature—acknowledgment of the broader contexts in which they are situated is paramount. The individual's position within a culturally determined collective, as is emphasized in the quote above, is a smaller-scale example of each human's position within the larger contexts of society, humanity, and nature overall. These contextualizations are addressed within the stories, as has been discussed, through anthropomorphisms, the alienation from society occurring during war, the decentering and fragmentation of the self, and, as will be demonstrated in the following, the omnipresent theme of death and the destabilization of dualisms.

As in the majority of postmodern works of literature which "tend to fragment or at least to render unstable the traditional unified identity or subjectivity of character" (Hutcheon 90), Tim is characteristically marked by disunity. In his assessment of Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*,[7] James Dawes states that "[t]hrough a self-willed ignorance we are typically able to maintain the single, coherent view of subjectivity or intimacy—but in unexpected and traumatic crises, such as an encounter with death […], we can be jarred into assuming the objective view" (66). In "The Ghost Soldiers" in *The Things They Carried*, Tim has a kind of out-of-body experience which exemplifies a similar dissociation with, alienation from, and fragmentation of the self:

> I came unattached from the natural world. I felt the hinges go. Eyes closed, I seemed to rise up out of my own body and float through the dark […]. I was invisible; I had no shape, no substance; I weighed less than nothing. I just drifted. It was imagination, of course, but for a long while I hovered there […] (234)

> I was part of the night. I was the land itself – everything, everywhere – the fireflies and paddies, the moon, the midnight rustlings […] I was the blind stare in the eyes of all those poor, dead, dumbfuck ex-pals of mine […] I was Nam—the horror, the war. (235)

The fragmentation is most evident in the dissociation from his own body and appears even more emphasized in relation to the beginning of this particular story, when Tim recounts feeling as if he was no longer part of the group of soldiers. He reports feeling like he had "become a civilian" (221) after having spent time in the hospital rehabilitating after being shot, yet he could no longer identify with the person he was before the war either because his experiences in Vietnam—his "traumatic crisis" in Dawes' terms—had changed him (O'Brien 227). His out-of-body experience, then, is the result of a culmination of experiences

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[7]   Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*, a Civil War novel published in 1895, departed from the traditional romantic or realist approach to war (cf. Hölbling 95-96) in that it "presented an imaginative psychological portrait of a soldier's reactions to the confusion, horror, and random death associated with combat" (Herzog 137). Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried, Going After Cacciato* (1978), and *If I Die in a Combat Zone* (1973) are all reminiscent of Crane's style and themes such as fear, courage, and manhood (cf. Herzog 137-38).

that have alienated him from himself. As is especially evident in the second part of the excerpt, the dissociation and Tim's realization of his embeddedness in nature and the war create tension. There is a conflict between Tim feeling like he has become "unattached from the natural world" and his affirmations of being part of said world as he is "part of the night" and "the land itself." Thus, feeling detached from nature is, perforce, a detachment and a sense of alienation from himself, a paradigmatic display of the chaotic forces of war at work not only on the outside—i.e. in the war as hostile environment—but within Tim himself.

Moreover, his description of his out-of-body experience can be read as a smaller-scale example of the overall dynamic of *The Things They Carried*. As a whole, the collection suggests a severance of the individual soldier from US society and implicitly stages a critique of the anthropocentric, culturally conditioned and mediated human perception by exposing its inapplicability in contexts aside from the society that bore them. Furthermore, the collection suggests an intricate connection between humans and nature. In addition to the anthropomorphisms within the stories, an abundance of *memento mori* evoke this connection as symbols for the awareness not only of the impermanence of life but of the fact that all life—including human life—is transient and thus determined by natural principles. Collectively, the *memento mori* culminate into a more general reminder of the fact that humans are inextricable from nature. I term this *memento naturae*, a derivative concept which encompasses a greater range of literary imagery such as parallelisms, particular instances of anthropomorphisms, *memento mori*, and explicit comparisons and reflections on the connection between humans and nature. Thus, these images function not only as reminders of human transience but of the humans' embeddedness within nature. While the narrator and his fellow soldiers experience alienation from US society in one moment, they are often re-embedded within their natural environment in the next. This is the case in "The Things They Carried" in which the narrator recalls the soldiers' mental escape from the war by imagining being carried away by "freedom birds […] beyond duty, beyond gravity and mortification and global entanglements […] sailing that big silver freedom bird over the mountains and oceans, over America, over the farms and sleeping cities and cemeteries" (21-22). This imaginary escape—the vision of being freed by nature on birds' wings—gives them a feeling of freedom from all constraints, of having transcended their limits, and of no longer being subject to societal expectations or imposed duties ("over America"), let alone the fear of impending death ("cemeteries"). Yet, the *memento mori* in the first sentence of the succeeding paragraph tethers them to the ground: "On the morning after Ted Lavender died […]" (22). This temporal marker is, at once, a reminder of mortality and as a *memento naturae*, a reminder that they are temporally and physically bound by the war and by nature.

Further examples of *memento naturae* can be found within the numerous mentions of the proximity to death as intensifying the experience of life—a sort of transformation of

memento mori into *carpe diem*—emphasizing yet again the inherently problematic nature of binary oppositions:

> At its core, perhaps, war is just another name for death, and yet any soldier will tell you, if he tells the truth, that proximity to death brings with it a corresponding proximity to life. […] Though it's odd, you're never more alive than when you're almost dead. You recognize what's valuable. Freshly, as if for the first time, […]. (87-88)

> It's a hard thing to explain to somebody who hasn't felt it, but the presence of death and danger has a way of bringing you fully awake. It makes things vivid. (219)

By contrasting seeming opposites such as the imminent danger posed by death and the vivacity associated with life and juxtaposing as well as linking them together, these *memento mori* are turned into *memento naturae*; the narrator's heightened awareness of life in the face of death evokes an understanding of humans as anchored within nature by their mortality. According to the narrator, the soldiers' experience when confronted with death is one of demystification. Death opens their eyes to life as a raw experience, as unmediated reality, and thus aids in bringing things into perspective. And if being aware of one's mortality and the world is what it takes to truly feel alive, being caught within anthropocentric paradigms is a removal of the self from life as it clouds perception; and being awoken by death and therefore brought back to nature, in contrast, "makes things vivid."

Moreover, the fact that death functions as a sort of amplifier of life destabilizes the life-death dichotomy insofar as a full experience of life is dependent upon an acceptance of and a proximity to death, shifting the focus not onto the oppositional nature of the two but on their connection. Most people are only vaguely aware of their eventual and usually temporally distant death, in that they do not feel the heightened sense of mortality that the omnipresent impending danger of a violent death in armed battle induces. The pressing presence of death within the context of war emphasizes that human life is determined by nature and that death is an inevitable part of any and every life. Combat evokes a significantly amplified, acute awareness of one's mortality, and with it, humans are inscribed into nature. As a result, the nature-culture dualism is further undermined as the inextricability of humans from nature is acknowledged. The following quote underlines the collection's overarching tendency to infuse the nonhuman with life and challenge the idea of binary opposites: "The wounds at his neck had not yet clotted, which made him seem animate even in death, the blood still spreading out across his shirt" (142). In this description of a dying enemy soldier, the distinction between life and death is blurred as the blood that trickles from his body makes him seem, somehow, still alive. The active voice used to describe the blood spreading out turns the blood into a subject rather than an object. Ascribing agency to this part of the soldier while he as a person has been stripped of his, implies that even though he is dead, there may still be vitality in a broader sense. The portrayal of death as an essential part of life within these excerpts underlines

interconnection, which is reinforced as humans are analogously depicted as indissolubly linked with nature.

The complexity and ambiguity that constitute these relationships are further emphasized when Tim attempts to describe the multifacetedness of war:

> War is nasty; war is fun. War is thrilling; war is drudgery. War makes you a man; war makes you dead.
>
> The truths are contradictory. It can be argued, for instance, that war is grotesque. But in truth war is also beauty. [...]
>
> To generalize about war is like generalizing about peace. Almost everything is true. Almost nothing is true. (87)

Within the first three sentences, the struggle to define war according to preexisting, dualistic categories is foregrounded. The narrator's conclusion is that war cannot be clearly defined as one thing or its counterpart as it always oscillates in a space between. The implicit suggestion here is that these juxtaposed terms are not mutually exclusive. As he says, "[t]he truths are contradictory," stressing that in order to arrive at truth, you need to accept that there are no static, straightforward definitions. In his analysis of Vietnam War stories written by "soldier-authors," Herzog also notes this obscurity in the portrayal of war: "the best tales [...] cut through ideological cant and battlefield action to explore the often disturbing, ambiguous, and complex elements of war, human behavior and life" by narrating "war's obscenity, as well as its attraction" (2). "Almost everything is true" and "almost nothing is true" during war, and therefore, seeming polar opposites—such as war and peace—blend as the focus shifts from their differences to their similarities. For example, beauty is said to be descriptive of war, even though common understanding would ascribe beauty to peace. Terms that are traditionally regarded as opposites are revealed to be multifaceted and therefore not cleanly distinguishable. This leads to the conclusion that dualistic thinking could not result in a definition that is reflective of both nature and culture. The seeming binary between the two entities is dependent on both counterparts not only for their individual definition but in order to be utilized, making their relation one of connection and reciprocity.

Death in *The Things They Carried* is omnipresent not only due to its expected prevalence in the narratives that deal with combat and the war's aftermath. It is also and especially evoked in Tim's preoccupation with the subject in metanarrative comments, such as "We kept the dead alive with stories" (267), and in the way he relates events to death temporally as discussed before. These narrative techniques and the function of death as a narrative device to embed humans within nature—as *memento naturae*—and seemingly contradictorily foregrounding the proximity to life, result in the destabilization of dichotomies such as nature and culture or life and death. In addition, the stories suggest a mutual dependence among entities that are traditionally conceptualized in dualistic terms by decentering the individual specifically and humans more generally, thereby undermining anthropocentrism and the presupposition that humans are extricable from nature.

4. From Independence to Interaction and Interconnectedness

While the intricate connection between nature and humans is covertly communicated by the breaking down of dualisms within the text, there are also passages in which their interaction is presented more overtly, such as in the following excerpt from the story "Spin": "A field of elephant grass weighted with wind, bowing under the stir of a helicopter's blades, the grass dark and servile, bending low, but then rising straight again when the chopper went away" (40). The scene the narrator recounts is temporally situated during the war and shows interaction through action and reaction. While the "bowing" of the blades and the quality of this movement, which is described as "servile" show nature's reaction to a human action and may evoke a feeling of submission, the phrase "rising straight again" shifts the focus to nature's ability to act independently, its resilience, and its ability to recover. Thus, reading this sentence through an ecocritical lens reveals that nature is capable of reaction, action, and interaction which underlines the conception of nature as possessing agency analogous to the suggestion implicit within anthropomorphisms.

The following excerpt is taken from the story titled "On the Rainy River," referred to previously in section 2, in which the narrator thinks back to the time he spent at the Tip Top Lodge in Minnesota in August 1968, considering deserting to Canada before his deployment to Vietnam. The passage consists of a retrospective account of a pre-war experience of a boating trip and within it, a negotiation of nature that paints an image of the human-nature relationship that is, essentially, defined by interconnectedness:

> All around us, I remember, there was a vastness to the world, an unpeopled rawness, just the trees and the sky and the water reaching out toward nowhere. […]
>
> I remember the wind in my ears and the sound of the old outboard Evinrude. For a time I didn't pay attention to anything, just feeling the cold spray against my face, but then it occurred to me that at some point we must've passed into Canadian waters, across that dotted line between two different worlds, and I remember the sudden tightness in my chest as I looked up and watched the far shore come at me. This wasn't a daydream. It was tangible and real. (58)

The passage starts out with an idyllic description of nature, bringing to the forefront the idea of nature as a vast, untouched wilderness. The dichotomy is still in effect here, as nature is portrayed as distinguishable from human subjects, as that which surrounds them. Initially, the narrator does not communicate feeling connected to or part of his environment. However, nature is, already, more than mere background or setting—rather it is an actor, as it "reaches out" itself. Though, the direction of this action, "nowhere," is less affirming because it can be read in a variety of ways. It can be received as a suggestion of anthropological difference or as underlining the anthropocentric notion that humans are singularly capable of goal-oriented action. Then again, it could also imply that there is nowhere for the nonhuman to reach out to because its reciprocal relationship with the human will make it impossible for there to be any kind of goal to reach towards since nature as untouched wilderness is already in the process of becoming extinct. Indeed, the initial,

almost paradisiacal impression of an uninhabited wilderness, an idealized nature, is alleviated within the subsequent sentences; a change is reflected in the narrator's awareness as his and his companion's presence merge with their surroundings. He recalls auditory stimuli, the wind and the sound of the boat's engine, a juxtaposition of natural and human-made sounds. The subsequent recollection of a sensory stimulus in the form of the spray of water is then juxtaposed not with a sensory but with a knowledge-based memory. The narrator recalls coming to the sudden realization that they have crossed the border from the United States to Canada, which runs through the river. Nations and borders are cultural constructs, and as the narrator becomes aware of this and lets his perception of the world be mediated by what he knows, the tone of the narrative shifts. The initially established dichotomy is increasingly challenged as the boundary between humans and nature is blurred.

The feeling of worlds coming together by crossing "that dotted line between two different worlds," which alludes to the border between the two nations, can also be understood as the line between the human and the nonhuman, nature and culture, empirical reality and cultural construction, or past and present. As the boundary between the human and the natural world has already begun to blur in the preceding description, the dotted line functions as a visualization of the loss of a clear distinction between the two. Within the context of the narrative, it can also be seen as foreshadowing the narrator's and his fellow soldiers' sentiment of alienation from US society. Meanwhile, the intertwinement of their past and present lives that is continuously emphasized through the narrative oscillation between the two, underlines, once again, the fact that there is no clear distinction. The dotted line, then, prefigures the feeling of decenteredness and disorientation the soldiers experience during the war, while also functioning as a harbinger of the breaking down of dualisms within the stories. In addition, the dotted line is emblematic of the way in which the soldiers struggle to unite their past selves with their soldier-selves, as their ties with society and cultural thought structures are increasingly strained. It is rightfully dotted from this perspective as well. While the soldiers may feel alienated from US society and as the cultural constructs determined by that society no longer offer any guidance, they still employ these constructs and structures while trying to make sense of the unfamiliar, chaotic world they find themselves in. Since the narrator decides that day, on the lake, whether to run or face his fears by going to war, this dotted line marks a turning point for him as well. And as the work in its entirety shows, through its overall lack of temporal linearity, even as a temporal marker the line is rightfully dotted because past, present, and future are impossible to understand in isolation. Once again, the ideas of cleanly divisible opposites and distinct boundaries are challenged. As the narrator concludes the paragraph by saying it was not a dream but rather "tangible and real," he emphasizes the fact that interconnectedness and feeling embedded in nature through close proximity to it feels real.

The amalgamation of the human and the nonhuman suggested within this excerpt grows increasingly evident as the passage continues:

> The shoreline was dense with brush and timber. I could see tiny red berries on the bushes. I could see a squirrel up in one of the birch trees, a big crow looking at me from a boulder along the river. That close—twenty yards—and I could see the delicate latticework of the leaves, the texture of the soil, the browned needles beneath the pines, the configurations of geology and human history. (58-59)

The word "timber" refers to wood as it is used for building or growing trees that can later be used as such (cf. *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* 294) and therefore necessarily implies a connection between humans and nature. The same applies to the term "latticework," which describes a specific kind of structure or arrangement of wood in building, thus it originally denotes something humanmade. Both of these terms are examples of the way in which humans view nature from an anthropocentric perspective and utilize nature as a resource, calling into question the existence of an untouched, "unpeopled" nature. The paragraph's final sentence, then, does not raise any new issues but brings the implied argument home. The "configuration of geology and human history" indisputably supports the notion of the interconnectedness between natural and human history and, with that, nature and culture.

Conclusion

As this analysis exemplifies, ecocritical (re-)readings of postwar literature may yield valuable contributions to the overarching issue of the current ecological crisis by offering possible ways of transcending the limits of Western anthropocentric thinking through the reorientation and renegotiation of the human-nature relationship. The portrayal of nature, humans, and their relation in *The Things They Carried* moves away from anthropological difference, dualistic thinking, and the notion of human primacy—key enablers and perpetuators of anthropocentrism—thereby challenging the fundamental axioms of traditional Western thinking. The analysis has shown that reading anthropomorphisms from an eco- rather than an anthropocentric point of view ascribes agency to nature, effacing one of the main differentiators between the human and the nonhuman, i.e. the idea that the capacity for intentional action is a distinctive human feature (cf. Benson 259; Clark 32). Equating the human and the nonhuman in this way shifts the focus from their differences to their similarities, facilitating the erasure of the culturally constructed boundary between them. This destabilization of the dichotomy is reiterated in the text through the alienation of the soldiers in Tim's company from US society, further questioning the position of individuals both within and outside of society. The overall decentering of the human and the fragmentation of subjectivity detectable in the narrator were revealed as intensifying the loss of unity that is typical for postmodern literature, leading to a devaluation of the individual and the human and amplifying the shift away from the hierarchy implied within dualistic conceptions. In contrast, this removal from society is countered by embedding the human within nature through *memento mori* or, more generally, *memento naturae.* As I have shown, these themes and devices collectively portray the indivisibility of nature and

humans. Ultimately, this analysis of *The Things They Carried* offers an alternative approach to traditional literary depictions of the human and the nonhuman, one that values nature in itself and encourages consideration of the intricacies and complexities that characterize the nature-human relationship.

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