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**Vietnam Fought and Imagined: the Images of the Mythic Western Frontier in  
American Vietnam War Literature**

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### Abstract

This thesis seeks to examine how a particularly American ideological formation called the frontier myth has been re-enacted, challenged, and redefined in the literary works written by several American authors. Existing researches about the pervasiveness of the frontier mythology in American culture written by scholars such as Richard Slotkin, Richard Drinnon, and others demonstrate that, as the myth of the frontier—the popular discourse that romanticizes early white settlers’ violent confrontation with American Indians in the New World wilderness—has been deeply inscribed in America’s collective consciousness, when they faced with the war in a remote Southeast Asian country, many Americans have adopted its conventional narrative patterns, images, and vocabulary to narrate their experiences therein. The word, Indian Country—a military jargon that US military officers commonly used to designate hostile terrains outside the control of the South Vietnamese government—would aptly corroborate their argument.

Drawing upon Edward Said’s exegesis of a structure of power that privileged Europeans assumed when they gazed at and wrote about the place and people categorized as “Oriental,” I contend that the images of the frontier frequently appearing in US Vietnam War accounts are America’s “imaginative geography” of Vietnam. By closely looking at the Vietnamese landscapes that American authors describe, I intend to investigate the extent to which the authors’ view of Vietnam are informed, or limited, by the cultural imperatives of the myth. At the same time, I will also look for instances in which the authors attempt to challenge the very discourse that they have internalized.

I will read several novels and stories of American Vietnam War literature in a loosely chronological manner—from early American Vietnam novels such as William Lederer’s and Eugene Burdick’s *The Ugly American* (1958), through three notable Vietnam-vet writers’ works published between the late ’70s and ’90s that include Tim O’Brien’s *Going After Cacciato* (1978) and *The Things They Carried* (1990), to Denis Johnson’s *Tree of Smoke* (2007), a recent novel produced after 9/11. Hereby, I aim to explain the larger cultural/political significances that underlie the images of the frontier appearing in American Vietnam War narratives, and their vicissitude through time. While the authors of early US Vietnam War narratives reproduced stereotypical representations of the land and people of Vietnam that largely reflected the colonial/racist ideologies embedded in the myth, the succeeding generations of authors, with varying degrees of success, have undermined what has conventionally been regarded as America’s master narrative, by, for instance, deliberately subverting the conventional narrative patterns of the frontier myth, or by incorporating into their narratives the Vietnamese points of view that have often been omitted in earlier US Vietnam War accounts.

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## **Introduction: Vietnam as “Indian Country”: the Images of the Mythic West as America’s Imaginative Geography of Vietnam**

### **Sartre’s Criticism of the “Picturesque” Representations of Asia and Edward Said’s Idea of Imaginative Geography**

In 1954, in a preface to Cartier-Bresson’s *D’une Chine à L’autre*, Jean-Paul Sartre criticized the “picturesque,” the ways in which the West fabricated skewed images of Asia—in this essay specifically China—and imposed them on the people who actually inhabit the area. Recalling his childhood, Sartre confesses that his understanding/impression of China and its people at the time was largely formulated by the sense of dread and hostility that the “picturesque” portrayals of China circulated in popular media had evoked. More often than not, China and the Chinese were represented to him as being “intimidating.”<sup>1</sup> For instance, he was told about the rotten eggs they were so fond of, the cacophonous music that sounded eerie to the ears familiarized with western music, the barbarous tortures they were alleged so ingeniously to contrive.<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that he contends at the very beginning that “picturesque has its origin in war and a refusal to understand the enemy” (22). In other words, Sartre understands the picturesque as a way of imagining others without making the effort to understand their

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<sup>1</sup> Jean–Paul Sartre, “From One China to Another,” *Colonialism and Neocolonialism*, trans. Azzedin Haddour, Steve Brewer and Terry McWilliams (New York: Routledge, 2006) 22–35. 23.

<sup>2</sup> Sartre, “From One China to Another” 23.

culture and history. Through various picturesque representations of China, the French distinguished themselves from the Chinese, degrading them into an abominable enemy and a backward race. Sartre then asserts that the biased portrayals prevent the West from recognizing “the material truth”: the reality of poverty which both colonial and capitalistic West and feudal Chinese regimes have inflicted upon the people, the effects of which they find not only in China, but in fact in many of their own poverty-stricken backstreets as well. In this respect, the seeming alienness of Asian people dissolves, and there remain, Sartre claims, the material facts of the exploitation that the wealthy, powerful have imposed upon the poor.

Although Sartre did not make any direct reference to Vietnam in the preface, the year 1954 was pivotal in French colonial history in Vietnam. In May, the French army was defeated by Vietminh in the battle of Dien Bien Phu, and forced to put an end to its dominance over Indochina spanning from the middle of the nineteenth century with the exception of the brief period of Japanese domination during the Second World War. The preceding conflict between French troops, who had been trying to regain control over their former colony and Vietminh nationalists must have exerted great impact on Sartre’s writing on Western representation of China, whose imperial force had long been a constant threat to the independence of indigenous people in the peninsula before French



colonization. Later in 1967, as the President of the International War Crimes Tribunal created by Bertrand Russell, Sartre declared himself against America's military intervention in Vietnam, contending that the war was nothing but "a new stage in the development of imperialism, a stage usually called neocolonialism because it is characterized by aggression against a former colony which has already gained its independence, with the aim of subjugating it anew to colonial rule."<sup>3</sup>

In Sartre's brief essay on the "picturesque," we may be able to find the seeds of thoughts that will, some twenty years later, flourish in Edward Said's *Orientalism*. Sartre's preface is, like Said's extensive work, a meditation on how the West have imagined and represented "others" whom they categorize as the Orientals, and demonstrates the process through which these images have in reality authorized the Western colonialists' political as well as economic control over them. Interestingly, in much the same way as Said explains his concept of imaginative geography, Sartre contends that the images of a certain geographical space are frequently projected onto the portrayals of its inhabitants. Sartre recalls that the feelings of dread and hostility that he used to harbour toward the Chinese people are often aroused in association with the abominable, repugnant images of lower creatures and natural elements of the Chinese

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<sup>3</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, "Vietnam: Imperialism and Genocide," *Between Existentialism and Marxism*, trans. John Mathews (London: NLB, 1974) 67–83. 73.

landscapes:

But the Asians frightened me, like those crabs in the rice fields which dart between two rows, like those locusts which descend on the great plains and devastate everything. We are lords of fishes, rats and monkeys; the Chinese are superior arthropods, they rule over the arthropods.<sup>4</sup>

The conventional images of the Chinese people that Sartre remembers here are tinged with the desire and anxiety of the observers—that is, according to Sartre, the Western ruling class, representing seventy percent of all the then French population. Chinese people are unduly identified with vermin—crabs and locusts—that destroy crops, and thus are automatically demoted to sub-humans, creatures of a lower order. The abominable images of Asian “arthropods” are in turn projected on to the land, and the place itself becomes hostile in the observers’ vision. Significantly, the “picturesque” representations—the kinds of popular discourse that depict Chinese as pestilential insects—have in effect served to legitimize the Western colonialists’ control over China and its people: the animalized representations of the Chinese people and the images of their uncivilized, insanitary land imply that the technologically advanced West must enlighten the savage Chinese, thereby disinfecting and sanitising the Asian landscapes.

The drive for pathologizing China also reflects the colonialists’ fear of dethronement: the terror of contamination not only speaks of the crisis of the Westerners’ physical vigour in a remote, alien environment, but also figuratively expresses the psychological fear of

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<sup>4</sup> Sartre, “From One China to Another” 23.

losing imperial control over their former colonies. The Chinese people, therefore, are imagined not as humans, but rather as insect pests—“superior arthropods” who are “greed[y]” and “swarming,” whose ascent is “frighten[ing]” to the wholesome body of the Western imperial orders. Despite all these misrepresentations, of course, as Sartre declares, “no one has the right to confuse this swarming [i.e. Chinese people crowded in streets] with a plague of locusts. (28)

One can understand further the ways in which the Western observers’ desires inform the “picturesque” representations of Asia as well as the process through which these images endorse the West’s colonization thereof, when referring to Said’s concept of imaginative geography, which he expounds in *Orientalism*. Said contends that the representations of a certain place—including its people, landscapes, and various elements of nature—reflect the desires and fantasies of the subject who produce them.<sup>5</sup>

Gaston Bachelard’s original argument of the poetic of space, on which Said largely bases his discussion, is primarily meant to explicate a “kind of poetic process” by which humankind establish relationships with, or make sense of the outside world by giving a subjective sense of order to their environment. Humankind endow spaces with imaginative or figurative values, besides understanding their physical characteristics.

Whereupon “vacant or anonymous reaches of distances are converted into meaning for

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<sup>5</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London and New York: Penguin, 2003) 49 – 73.

us.”<sup>6</sup> For instance, a certain space used frequently in one’s household becomes familiar to the inhabitant, while some other sequestered space unfamiliar, cold, or dark. Said, however, develops Bachelard’s idea into an exegesis of a structure of power that privileged European authors have assumed when they gaze at and write about the Orient. The innumerable texts about the place called Orient—including official documents, scholarly articles, fictions, travel-writings, and so forth—produced in the European imperial centres are by no means purely empirical data about certain designated areas and groups of people who inhabit therein. They are instead replete with various figurative meanings that the authors ascribe to the landscapes and the local people. The lands of the Orient have often been associated with the images of novelty, backwardness, exoticism, antiquity, femininity, and its inhabitants are in turn turned into noble savages, alluring females, or inferior, hostile sub-humans in manners that reflect the observers’ fantasies, desires, and preconceived notions about the place. Those visions themselves become the authentic representations of the Orient, as succeeding generations of writers endorse them, by observing and writing about the place within a framework that is largely based upon their predecessors’ theories. And those often negative images/significances have in effect served to authorize the European imperial powers’ aggressive actions against the people called Orientals.

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<sup>6</sup> Said 55.

What is equally important in understanding Said's concept of imaginative geography is that it concerns the identity formation process of the observers themselves. By making their own places "home" and in turn perceiving other places as "alien" or "outside," the gazing subjects consolidate their own sense of identity distinct from alien others. Said, therefore, maintains that "imaginative geography and history help the mind to intensify its own sense of itself by dramatizing the distance and difference between what is close and what is far away."<sup>7</sup> Later in *Orientalism* Said suggests that, more often than not, the negative images that European authors assign to the Orient are the mirror-images of themselves, "as if men saw Islam as a reflection of his own chosen weakness."<sup>8</sup> That is, the attributes that the Orient, as an inferior other, have often been identified with—"backwardness, degeneracy, and inequity with the West"—are also those of the marginalised, the underprivileged, and the oppressed in Western society: "delinquents, the insane, women, the poor."<sup>9</sup>

### **The Indian War Metaphor and America's Vietnam Experiences**

Being informed by Sartre's essay on "picturesque" representations of Asia as well as Said's concept of imaginative geography, I would argue that similar kinds of psychological process have operated when Americans see Vietnam and narrate their

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<sup>7</sup> Said 55.

<sup>8</sup> Said 209.

<sup>9</sup> Said 206 – 07.

experiences in the nation's prolonged war against the Vietnamese communists'—nationalists' forces. In particular, by focusing upon the images of American frontier that frequently appear in American authors' accounts of the Vietnam War, I will examine the imaginative, or figurative significances that Americans have imposed upon the land and the people of Vietnam. As the name "Indian Country"—a military jargon that the then military officers would commonly use to describe the Vietnamese terrains outside the control of South Vietnamese government—aptly indicates, Americans from diverse backgrounds—military officers, politicians, journalists, fiction writers, film makers and others—have often narrated America's experiences in the Vietnam War in close association with the myth of their frontier past. Francis Fitzgerald argues that, by identifying Vietnamese with Indians, whom their ancestral warriors fought against, and Vietnamese terrains with the uncivilised natural world of the New World, the Indian War metaphor have "put the Vietnam War into a definite historical and mythological perspective: the Americans were once again embarked upon a heroic and (for themselves) almost painless conquest of an inferior race."<sup>10</sup> The ones who had associated Vietnam with the conventional images of the western frontier were not limited to pro-war, right-wing politicians and military officials. Anti-war intellectuals including Gary Snyder, Susan Sontag, Mary McCarthy and others, who expressed emphatic protest

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<sup>10</sup> Francis Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2002) 367 – 68.

against US military interventionism in Vietnam, portrayed Vietnam in terms of the frontier: they often depicted the North Vietnamese citizens as noble, innocent Indians inhabiting the sublime Asian wilderness, while describing US military as the evil machines of the powerful corporate state devastating their ideally anti-modern ways of life and fertile homeland.<sup>11</sup> Existing researches about the frontier mythology in American culture by scholars such as Richard Slotkin and Richard Drinnon have also demonstrated the persistence of Indian War metaphor in American cultural representations of the Vietnam War. As the nation's most powerful myth, the myth of the frontier—the popular narratives/discourses that romanticize early white settlers' westward migration across the New World wilderness and their battle against native Americans—have deeply been embedded in a significant part of America's collective consciousness. So much so that, when faced with the war in a remote Southeast Asian country, many Americans have almost inevitably used its conventional narrative patterns, images, vocabulary, and so forth to describe their experiences therein.<sup>12</sup>

In this thesis, by identifying the images of the frontier imposed upon the land and

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<sup>11</sup> John Hellmann, *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986) 71–95. Milton J. Bates, *The Wars We Took to Vietnam: Cultural Conflict and Storytelling* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1996) 29–33.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998) 494 – 96, 504, and passim. Richard Drinnon, *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating and Empire-Building* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980) 355–467.

the people of Vietnam as America's imaginative geography of Vietnam, I intend to investigate the ways in which a particularly American ideological formation called the frontier myth has been re-enacted, challenged, and redefined in the literary works written by American authors. I will read several novels and stories of American Vietnam War literature published between 1958 and 2007 in a loosely chronological manner. Herewith, I aim to explain the larger cultural/political significances that underlie the images of the frontier appearing in American Vietnam War narratives, and their vicissitude through time.

The studies of American Vietnam War literature that examine America's past literary legacy's influence upon the fictions, poetry, and memoirs about the war in Vietnam have long been extant since Philip D. Beidler's seminal work, *American Literature and the Experience of Vietnam* (1982), opened up a path. Asserting that "it seems almost as if our classic inheritance of native expression has prophesied much of what we know of Vietnam," the author argues that America's pre-war tradition prefigure its war stories about Vietnam.<sup>13</sup> Exploring the ground that Beidler had pioneered, in his *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam* (1986), John Hellmann in particular looked into the complex relationship between American Vietnam War literature and the frontier

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<sup>13</sup> Philip D. Beidler, *American Literature and the Experience of Vietnam* (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1982) 19.



mythology. Like Slotkin and others, Hellmann argues that the myth of the frontier is America's most cogent myth that compellingly speaks of the visions of the nation's past and future, and that defines its present value and purposes. Hellmann contends that, however, for many Americans participating in the war Vietnam appeared as "anti-frontier"<sup>14</sup> that in many ways thwarted their expectations. Whereupon, he closely investigates the ways in which American authors questioned the legitimacy of the myth in their novels and memoirs about the war. Hellmann's work set a direction that some of succeeding scholarly researches about American Vietnam War literature would follow. Thomas C. Herzog's and Milton J. Bates's works can be counted as two examples, among others, that have attempted to develop further Hellman's project.

In his brief, insightful essay, "John Wayne in a Modern Heart of Darkness" (1988), Herzog carries on Hellmann's thesis that Vietnam was "anti-frontier" that shattered Americans' illusions. Reading several novels and memoirs of Vietnam veteran authors and journalists that include Ron Kovic's *Born on the Forth of July* (1976), and Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War* (1977), Herzog argues that their Vietnam accounts "become antidote to the simplistic tale" of combat commonly found in popular Western as well as World War II movies.<sup>15</sup> Milton J. Bates maintains in his *The Wars We Took to*

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<sup>14</sup> Hellmann 164.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas C. Herzog, "John Wayne in a Modern Heart of Darkness: The American Soldier in Vietnam," *Search and Clear: Critical Responses to Literature and Films of the*

*Vietnam* (1996) that the frontier mythology is one of the fields of America's internal cultural conflicts—along with gender, race, class, and generation—that shaped America's experience of the war and later its literature of the war. In his chapter about “the Frontier War,” referring to Paul Ricoeur's argument that only when time is unified into narrative does it become meaningful, Bates asserts that the need to compose a temporally organized narrative out of the Vietnam War—an atypical war whose definitive beginning and ending are hard to specify—necessitates the use of the frontier myth that helps Americans to plot their war stories. Examining the stories of popular Vietnam War novels, memoirs, and films such as William Eastlake's *The Bamboo Bed* (1969), Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (1977), Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* (1978), Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979), and so forth, Bates analyses three types of the conventional thematic-temporal plot of the frontier narratives—the “linear,” “cyclical,” and “circular containment”—that American authors/filmmakers have frequently adopted in narrating their Vietnam War stories, and attempts to explain their larger cultural implications.<sup>16</sup>

While greatly indebted to the previous studies of American Vietnam War literature and its close relationship with the frontier mythology, I also take into account

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*Vietnam War*, ed. William J. Searle (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1988) 22.

<sup>16</sup> Bates 9–47.

the critical responses that succeeding researchers posed at them, and try to construct updated critique of America's representation of the Vietnam War. For instance, Renny Christopher's contention that Beidler, Hellmann, Herzog, and other critics are often insensitive to racism underlying the stereotypical representations of Vietnamese/Asian characters that some of the "canons" of Vietnam War literature that they applaud have reproduced will be reconsidered and negotiated with the readings of previous scholarship throughout the following chapters.<sup>17</sup>

By closely reading the descriptions of Vietnamese landscapes perceived by the protagonists and narrators, I intend to examine how far American authors' perception of Vietnam is influenced, or even limited by the ideological confines of their own culture. At the same time, however, I would also like to search for instances in which the conventions of American imaginative geography and their underlying neo-colonialist ideologies are challenged in US Vietnam War writings. Those instances are sometimes described as a moment of revelation in which American protagonists experience the breakdown of their initial illusions about Vietnam, when facing the extremely harsh realities of the war. Or, in other cases, the authors narrate the protagonists' actions in the war in manners that subvert the conventional narrative patterns of the frontier myth.

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<sup>17</sup> Renny Christopher, *The Viet Nam War/ The American War: Images and Representations in Euro-American and Vietnamese Exile Narratives* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995) 11–20.

As the novels and memoirs of the war are a part of the larger sense making process of America's Vietnam experiences, and reading those accounts in relation with the myth—the stories about the self-images of the United States of America and its citizens deeply inscribed in the nation's collective memory—would help us understand how the experiences of the war have forced Americans to change their perception of the United States' history, national identity and purposes.<sup>18</sup> Having brought about the death of over 5,800 Americans and between two and three million Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotians, the war has left a deep scar in the minds of Americans, and almost after forty years after the Fall of Saigon in April 1975, the memories of the war still exert its great influences over various spheres of US society.<sup>19</sup> As historian Andrew Priest points out, the Bush administration's decisions to invade Afghanistan and Iraq as part of his war on terror campaign have been criticized in its prolonged comparison to the Vietnam War.<sup>20</sup> Besides, it is still fresh in our mind that, when the United States has faced the more recent, still on-going crisis of Syria—in particular after Assad regime's use of chemical weapons against unarmed civilians was exposed in August 2013—Barack Obama was

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<sup>18</sup> For the definition of myth and its relationship with literature, see Northrop Frye, "Literature and Myth," ed. James Thorpe, *Relation of Literary Study* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1967) 27 – 72.

<sup>19</sup> Robert J. McMahon, "Contested Memory: the Vietnam War and American Society, 1975–2001," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (Spring 2002): 159–184. 160.

<sup>20</sup> Andrew Priest, "The Rhetoric of Revisionism: Presidential Rhetoric about the Vietnam War since 9/11," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (September 2013): 538–561. 539.

reluctant to carry out immediate US military intervention, and his indecision was advocated by politicians, journalists, and civilian activists who were deeply apprehensive of the possibility that, by sending its troops to Syria, America might re-enact the quagmire of Vietnam and Iraq.<sup>21</sup> The authors dealt with in this thesis have experienced the war in quite different manners—some witnessed it at first-hand either as a correspondent or a soldier, while others saw it via television or newspaper reportage as civilians at home. Nevertheless, without exceptions, as Americans living through the tumultuous contemporary world history, they all have had to write their accounts of the war, being acutely aware of the changes that the war had brought about both in US collective consciousness and in their own sense of identity as an individual American. A close examination of their works, thus I believe, would lead us to understand the changes that the experiences of the Vietnam War has brought about in US society. By meticulously unpacking the images of the mythic frontier appearing in their Vietnam narratives, I hope to contribute to the still on-going process of American interpretation of the war, a debate about how to make sense of the consequences of US intervention in Vietnam that have long been contested among people from various occupations and

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<sup>21</sup> Richard Brodsky, “Obama and Syria: Learning the lessons of Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan,” *Huffpost Politics* 3 September 2013, 27 November 2013 <[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/richard-brodsky/obama-and-syria-learning\\_b\\_3863181.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/richard-brodsky/obama-and-syria-learning_b_3863181.html)>. See also Jeffrey Frank, “Eisenhower 1954, Obama 2013,” *The New Yorker.com* 4 September 2013, 27 November 2013 <<http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/comment/2013/09/obama-syria-decision-remembering-eisenhower-and-vietnam.html>>.

standpoints.

In Chapter One, I will read two of the earliest American Vietnam War novels—William Lederer’s and Eugene Burdick’s *The Ugly American* (1958) and Robin Moore’s *The Green Berets* (1965). Referring to Slotkin and others’ studies of the frontier myth in American culture, I will demonstrate that Lederer–Burdick’s and Moore describe the land of Vietnam as an extension of America’s agricultural frontier and Indian War battlefield, respectively. By identifying them as what Bates calls the kind of “war story that endorses dominant ideologies,” I will illuminate the ways in which their representation of the land and people of Vietnam reflect the then US society’s dominant views of the Cold War politics as well as the strong feeling of hostility and racism toward Asians deeply ingrained in American culture.<sup>22</sup>

Chapter Two focuses upon the images of a “diseased land” and “vermin-like natives” that were commonly used by American military personnel to describe the land and the people of Vietnam. Examining their rhetorical similarities with the discourse of the frontier myth, I would argue that those images reflect America’s desires to place Vietnam in its mythological perspective, to downplay the complexities of the conflict, and to make it a simplistic battle between good and evil. By figuring Vietnam and its people as insanitary and disease-ridden, and, in turn, describing US military as a

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<sup>22</sup> Bates 2.

physician bound by a moral oath to sanitize/medicate the Vietnamese land and people, US military officials such as General Westmoreland in effect endorsed their aggressive actions against Vietnam, including the use of chemical defoliants and napalm bombing.

The discussion about the pathologized images of Vietnam leads us to examine Vietnam-vet author Stephen Wright's novel *Meditations in Green* (1983), which attempts to criticize America's neocolonialism by explicating the racist/colonialist ideologies underlying those images. The protagonist of the novel is James I. Griffin, an herbicide researcher working for the army's Agent Orange operation in Vietnam. By narrating the war through the protagonist's unique perspective, Wright satirically describes US military's erroneous efforts to control/sanitize the resilient forces of the Vietnamese natural world, which American officials regard as cumbersome, diseased, and insanitary. Informed by Susan Sontag's reflection on illness as metaphor, I will especially illuminate the ways in which Wright challenges the discourse of diseased Vietnam, by destabilizing the binary oppositional imagery of the technologically advanced American order and the backward, unsanitary Vietnamese chaos that Americans have fabricated.

As discussed in previous chapters, Vietnam had conventionally been imagined as an extension of the western frontier, where American males were expected to demonstrate their manhood commensurate with their mythic fathers', by engaging in a

fierce battle with Indian-like Vietnamese guerrillas. Then, if American authors write stories of GIs who escape the Vietnamese battlefield, one can argue that, in so doing, they in effect attempt to create a sort of counter-myth that challenge America's conventional ideas about masculinity, heroism, and war that have derived from the frontier mythology. In Chapter Three, I will read Robert Olen Butler's first novel *The Alleys of Eden* (1981), which narrates the story of Clifford Wilkes, who deserts the warzone and stays in a small apartment in the streets of Saigon as a fugitive with his Vietnamese lover Lanh. Like the protagonists and narrators of several other US Vietnam fictions and memoirs, Butler's hero firstly comes to the Vietnamese battlefield, motivated by a kind of anti-modern impulse that romanticizes the GIs' strenuous ways of life in the uncivilized landscapes of Vietnam. Closely looking at Butler's descriptions of the landscapes and people of Vietnam seen through the protagonist's eyes, I will contend that Butler's deserter-hero sees the uncivilized Vietnamese terrain as a "time free" frontier untouched by the harmful effects of the overripe US society, where he can forget his earlier frustrating experiences at home, and be reborn as an innocent youth.<sup>23</sup> However, the protagonist's actions and its terrible consequences lead him to face the harsh realities of the war that compels him to give up his initial illusions about Vietnam,

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<sup>23</sup> R.W.B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1955) 90.



and make him desert both the army and the battlefield. Examining the ways in which the protagonist's perception of Vietnam and its people drastically changes throughout his prolonged journey across the Vietnamese landscapes, I would argue that Butler's novel about an American deserter succeeds in formulating a cogent critique of America's ethnocentric discourse that represents Vietnam as an update of the mythic frontier.

Carrying on the same proposition that I have established in the previous chapter, in Chapter Four I will read two other Vietnam desertion narrative written by Tim O'Brien: *Going After Cacciato* (1978) and "On the Rainy River" (1990), and investigate the ways in which the author challenge the legacy of America's most powerful myth. Paying close attention to the images of American forest landscapes appearing in each work, I will examine the vicissitude of O'Brien's attitude toward the mythic frontier—landscapes of deep pristine woods traditionally considered to be an essentially American geography that gave birth to the nation's exceptionally democratic, egalitarian, righteous nature. For, in these two temporally separate but thematically related fictions, O'Brien describes the traumatic impact of the Vietnam War that lead numerous US citizens to suffer profound disillusionment with their shared beliefs about America's identity and purposes through the protagonists' experiences in American frontier landscapes.

In Chapter Five, I will read Denis Johnson's *Tree of Smoke* (2007), asserting that,

through his massive Vietnam novel, the author resists the revisionist discourse to reinterpret Vietnam as America's noble effort emerging amidst the tide of the nationwide anger and victimhood in the aftermath of 9/11. Like several previous US authors, Johnson depicts the battlefield of Vietnam as an anti-frontier that frustrates American male characters' expectations to reenact their mythic fathers' heroic adventures. However, comparing, in particular, the portrayals of WW II veteran characters in Johnson's novel and O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato*, I would argue that the former's nightmarish vision of the inverted frontier more thoroughly questions the legitimacy of America's myth about its essential goodness and power.

Equally important in understanding Johnson's efforts to undermine America's ethnocentric worldview is his inclusion of Vietnamese perspectives in the novel. One of the distinctive characteristics of *Tree of Smoke* is its attempts to portray the conflict from the viewpoints of several Vietnamese characters—the efforts that most American authors seldom make, or even fail to consider doing. Johnson's descriptions of the Vietnamese characters' experiences at times come across as defective. Nonetheless, when his literary insight is at best, the author succeeds in producing a compelling portrayal of the Vietnamese citizens' lives that prompts the reader to sympathetically imagine their plight in the war, which had devastated their homeland for decades.

Given the abundance of novels, short stories, memoirs, and other forms of non-fictions about the Vietnam War produced in the United States since the mid-1960s, undertaking a comprehensive study of so broad a genre as American Vietnam War literature would be almost impossible, or too audacious. Thus, I would neither claim that the present thesis is a thorough research of US accounts of the war, nor assert that the works dealt with in the following chapters exclusively represent the most significant “canons” of literary works emerging out of America’s Vietnam experiences. Nevertheless, for a study that claims to examine the writers’ attempts to challenge the myth that dramatizes white, Euro-Americans’ heroism and manhood, and that has accordingly served to preserve their hegemony in US society, the absence of works written by female, or men of colour, authors might appear to be fatally deficient, or even self-contradictory. By focusing on the white male authors’ works, however, I neither intend to belittle the roles of females and ethnic minorities in the war, nor propose to dismiss the possibility that their works—including Lynda Van Devanter’s *Home Before Morning: The True Story of an Army Nurse in Vietnam* (1983), Bobbie Ann Mason’s *In Country* (1985), Albert French’s *Patches of Fire: A Story of War and Redemption* (1997), Tatjana Soli’s *The Lotus Eaters* (2010), among others—pose significant challenges to what has long been thought to be America’s master narrative. Rather, I would argue that,

written by a group of people who have probably been most susceptible to the discourse of the frontier mythology, these white American male authors' works offer us instances that aptly demonstrate the extent to which their perceptions of Vietnam, its people, the war, and their own sense of identity are framed by the worldview that the myth provides. At the same time, these narratives would also give us telling examples of the ways in which, notwithstanding the myth's abiding influence in their mindset, the traumatic memories of the war compel the authors to challenge the very ideological formula that they have internalized. The patterns of storytelling and plot, the use of metaphorical imagery, the shifts of the narratives' focal point, and so forth that I examine in these works, I hope, would give us some instrumental clues to understanding other authors' efforts to call into question the legitimacy of America's most cogent myth.

## **Chapter One: Oriental Agricultural Frontier and Indian Battlefield: the Two Topoi of American Vietnam War Imaginative Geography in Eugene Burdick's and William Lederer's *The Ugly American* and Robin Moore's *The Green Berets***

### **Defining Vietnam in Terms of the Frontier**

Upon beginning his stories of Special Force soldiers most of which he claims to have witnessed at first hand, Robin Moore describes an US military base located in the midst of Vietnamese rainforest terrain as “a fort out of the old West,” the reincarnation of an old citadel built by European settlers in the western frontier to protect their colony from the onslaught of hostile Indians:

The headquarters of Special Forces Detachment B-520 in one of Vietnam's most active war zones looks exactly like a fort out of the old West. Although the B detachment are strictly support and administrative unit for the Special Force A teams fighting the Communist Viet Cong guerrillas in the jungle and rice paddies, this headquarters had been attacked twice in the last year by Viet Cong and both times had sustained casualties.<sup>24</sup>

The above passage taken from his bestselling novel, *The Green Berets* (1965), is especially worth noting, since it reveals a particularly American cultural framework in which Moore writes his account of the counterinsurgency operations of “heroic Special Force men” in Indochina; that is, an American imaginative geography that regards the Vietnamese terrain as an update of the frontier battlefield (2).

Before attempting a close examination of the novel, it is worth noting that in the brief introductory section named “Badge of Courage,” Moore ensures the authenticity of

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<sup>24</sup> Robin Moore, *The Green Berets* (New York: Avon Books, 1965) 25.

his reports, by explaining the reason why *The Green Berets* was composed as a fiction, rather than “a factual book” written in a “straight reportorial method”(9). The author decides to write about a series of incidents that involve the Green Berets’ actions in Vietnam as a work of fiction, since Special Forces’ missions are classified matters that, if certain factual names, dates, and locations were revealed, would “embarrass U.S. planners in Vietnam and might even jeopardize the careers of invaluable officers” (9–10). Nonetheless, Moore asserts the accuracy of his account: as a writer who was given a personal confidence of the then vice president Lyndon B. Johnson to write about the Green Berets’ counterinsurgency operations in Southeast Asia, and who has been trained, and even fought alongside Special Forces men in the foreign battleground, Moore testifies that all the events described in the novel “happened this way,” and although specific names of persons and places have been altered for protecting the individuals involved in the operations, “the basic truth” of the incidents remains intact (9). In this way, at the very beginning of the novel the author tries to establish his status as a reliable narrator, an expert of the most clandestine military matters, and entices the reader into believing that his story is no other than an unbiased portrayals of the difficult situations befalling both Americans and the Vietnamese alike in Indochina.

Notwithstanding Moore’s confidence in presenting an accurate description of the

war, a close reading of the novel leads us to identify a certain ideological formula that delimits or limits the author's perspective, and that works to belittle the culture, history and people of the remote terrain. In the above lines, Moore clearly associates the land of Vietnam with the US western frontier, where white immigrants fought against Native Americans over the possession of the land. As the story proceeds further, it becomes even more obvious that in Moore's vision of Vietnam and the conflict therein, US Special Force personnel are identified with heroic Anglo-Saxon warriors, and the NLF guerrillas and NVA forces are ferocious bad Indians in turn. In other words, as both John Hellmann and Renny Christopher have discussed, Moore's story of US counterinsurgency specialists in Vietnam are narrated in terms profoundly loaded with the mythic images that glorify Euro-American males' prowess in Indian War.<sup>25</sup> A number of preceding scholarly researches have already examined the close relationship between the myth of the frontier and US Vietnam War representations, and have also investigated the diverse ways in which each writer uses or relies upon the stock language of America's most powerful myth. As Milton J. Bates argues, "[i]n some cases the war story endorses the values of dominant ideologies; in other cases it calls them into

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<sup>25</sup> John Hellman, *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: Colombia University Press, 1986) 41–69. Renny Christopher, *The Viet Nam War / The American War: Images and Representations in Euro-American and Vietnamese Exile Narratives* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995) 201–09.

question.”<sup>26</sup> In other words, in writing about the war, some writers use the images of the mythic frontier to reinforce the dominant ideologies, whereas others adopt them to destabilize the very cultural framework in which the frontier mythology has been constructed. Both Hellman’s and Christopher’s arguments point out that Moore’s combat novel belongs to the former category, kinds of cultural representations of the war that advocate and reify the then US society’s hegemonic view on its own culture, the land of Vietnam, and its people. In particular, Christopher condemns Moore for his uncritical use of America’s national creation myth to describe Vietnam in a manner that reduces the political as well as historical complicities of the conflict into an oversimplified battle between “[good] Cowboys and [bad] Indians.”<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, she relates it to the writer’s “unabashed” use of stereotypes to represent the Vietnamese people—most of the Vietnamese characters are presented as coward, corrupted, deceptive, and barbaric—and contends that Moore’s novel reflects America’s colonial mind-set, its long-held racism and hostility toward Asia.<sup>28</sup> In this way, according to Christopher, the stereotypical Asian characters appearing in *The Green Berets* “represent the most influential early view of the war.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Milton J. Bates, *The Wars We Took to Vietnam: Cultural Conflict and Story Telling* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996) 2.

<sup>27</sup> Christopher 203.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid 207.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid 209.



Informed by previous studies of the close relationship between the frontier myth and US Vietnam War literature, I would also contend that the images of the mythic frontier transplanted into US Vietnam War accounts in many ways reflect American society's dominant view of the war, land, and people of Vietnam. Based on this proposition, in this chapter I will look at earlier US Vietnam fictions and attempt a further examination of the mythic images appearing in these narratives in order to analyse colonial, racist desires that have persistently underlain the hegemonic Euro-American culture closely associated with the myth of the frontier. In particular, I will focus upon the two earliest American books about the conflict in Vietnam—William J. Lederer's and Eugene Burdick's *The Ugly American* (1958) and Robin Moore's *The Green Beret*, which belong to the first type of the war stories that Bates categorizes. In the chapters following this, I will examine US Vietnam War fictions that seriously call into question the legitimacy of US intervention in Vietnam—kinds of war stories that relate to Bates's second category—in a loosely chronological manner. Therefore, the analyses of the earliest American Vietnam novels given in this chapter will be instrumental in understanding the ways in which US public's perceptions of the war and of its own culture have changed over the years, since the beginning of United States' involvement in Indochinese conflict in the 1950s.

Nevertheless, it should also be noted that the two categories of war stories that Bates explains by no means offer a static and distinct system of classification by which one can clearly distinguish one type of narrative from another. Even if a writer seems to express a strong disagreement with the official justification for US involvement in the war, it does not necessarily mean that his or her account is entirely immune from the power of the myth. As one of the United States' most cogent national creation narratives, the myth of the frontier has been deeply inscribed in the vocabulary of US culture and history as a sort of strong ideological formula or cultural code that works to define a people's thoughts and actions. A brief examination of William Eastlake's novel, *The Bamboo Bed* (1969), which Bates also analyses, offers an example that demonstrates the difficulties that US authors are confronted with in challenging conventional ideas and images about the war in Vietnam.

The plot of *The Bamboo Bed* centres around Captain Clancy, who lies dying in the Vietnamese jungle, severely wounded in an ambush, and a host of American characters who attempt to rescue him. When Clancy comes back to his senses after an initial stupor of pain, he tries to recall the incidents that led up to his Alpha Company's debacle:

Am I dying or dead? I do not know. Where am I? the captain thought. What am I doing here. [...] All I remember is that I was with Custer's Seventh Cavalry riding toward the Little Big Horn and we were struck by the Indians, After we

crossed the Rosebud we made it to Ridge Red Boy and then we were hit.<sup>30</sup>

Still unable to recover fully from the shock of severe injury, Clancy confuses the present war in Vietnam, in which he participates, with the legendary tragic battle of US Indian war in the late nineteenth-century, whose images he has probably seen in various cultural representations. The captain, however, soon realizes that his battle is not Battle of the Little Bighorn, and corrects his mistake: “No. I must have my wars confused. That was another time, another place. Other Indians.”<sup>31</sup> As Bates suggests, Clancy’s temporary confusion of Vietnam with the frontier Indian War and his subsequent adjustment to the reality demonstrates Eastlake’s literary power to undermine the images of the western frontier often imposed upon the land and the people of Vietnam. That is, the protagonist’s initial mistake functions as a satire on or self-ridicule of American ways of seeing Vietnam and of seeing America, itself, in its cultural terms, and his ensuing arrival at a more accurate version of truth testifies to his ability to “shrug off” the “fugue state.”<sup>32</sup> By repudiating the false analogy established between the war in Vietnam and US Indian War, the novel “shows greater powers of discrimination than many who have told stories about the Vietnam War.”<sup>33</sup> Thus according to Bates, Eastlake manages to resist the “so seductive” lure of “the likeliness between Vietnam and American frontier,”

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<sup>30</sup> William Eastlake, *The Bamboo Bed* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1969) 23.

<sup>31</sup> Eastlake 23.

<sup>32</sup> Bates 9.

<sup>33</sup> Bates 44.

and attempts to acknowledge the differences that many US “writers and filmmakers may overlook.”<sup>34</sup>

However, even though Eastlake’s novel seems to question the legitimacy of the discourse that regards Vietnam in terms of white Americans’ peculiar mythology, it simultaneously indicates the difficulties of overcoming the limitation of one’s own cultural framework. Although Clancy recognizes that the Vietnam War is not Custer’s Last Stand, he nonetheless preserves the analogy between Vietnam and the frontier: even after realizing that Battle of the Little Bighorn happened in “another time” and “another place,” and that the foe he fought with are neither Sioux nor Chayenne warriors, the protagonist still classifies the Vietnamese, his enemy, as “Other Indians.”

By quoting Vietnamese exile writer Le Ly Hayslip’s comment upon the great tumult that beset her homeland, Bates suggests that one of the gravest mistakes that the United States committed in the war was its failure to acknowledge fully the diverse viewpoints of the Vietnamese people. Bates contends that from Hayslip’s Vietnamese compatriot’s point of view, “what we [Americans] called the Vietnam War was [...] a collection of domestic wars that divided people according to ethnic group, class, religion, and sense of national destiny.”<sup>35</sup> However, the United States has failed to identify the

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<sup>34</sup> Bates 44.

<sup>35</sup> Bates 4.

Vietnamese people's aspiration for independence, religious zeal, and various inner conflicts taking place within Vietnam and "viewed Vietnam in politically simplistic terms, as merely another theater in the global war between democracy and communism."<sup>36</sup> Favouring the palatable view that America is the righteous defender of freedom and democracy, the United States were insensitive to the reasons behind the Vietnamese people's resistance against American military operations. As Richard Slotkin demonstrates, in calling for the "heroic" counterinsurgency offensive in the Third World, John F. Kennedy's administration invoked the myth of the frontier. By presenting himself and American Special Forces as heroic warriors fighting against the threat of communism in the "frontier" of the Third World, Kennedy attained the public's support for commencing US military intervention in Vietnam, which led to the escalation of American military efforts under the Johnson administration.<sup>37</sup> As examined above, Eastlake's novel poses significant moral questions about Americans' attempts to interpret Vietnam in their own cultural framework. Eastlake's apocalyptic tragicomedy in which what was intended to be America's latest glory ends up in a catastrophic disaster apparently contradicts the romanticized images of War in Indochina. Nevertheless, as the story of *The Bamboo Bed* is narrated in terms closely associated with the myth of the

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<sup>36</sup> Bates 4.

<sup>37</sup> Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998) 489–504.

frontier, it still carries the problems inherent in describing the history, land, and people of a different culture in terms of one's own cultural code. In other words, by identifying Vietnam as "another" frontier and the Vietnamese people as "another" Indian, it potentially reproduces the kinds of discourse that endorse US military actions in the remote Asian country. By closely examining *The Ugly Americans* and *The Green Berets*—the two best-selling earliest US Vietnam fictions—that attempt to interpret Vietnam in America's mythic perspective, in this chapter I intend to identify the types of racist, ethnocentric mind-set deeply inscribed in the American myth of the frontier that successive US writers have inherited, and also tried to challenge.

### **Vietnam as America's New Frontier: Lederer–Burdick's *The Ugly American***

At first glance, Lederer and Burdick, the co-authors of *The Ugly American*, seem to criticize Americans who see Sarkhan—a fictitious country located in Southeast Asia that in many ways resembles Vietnam—through the distorted lens of one's own imperial desire, and who try to mould the remote country into a colony of the United States. The novel begins with a scene wherein Louis Sears, an American Ambassador to Sarkhan, looks at the streets of Haido—the capital of the country—from the windows of his office:

The lawn of the Embassy swept down to the main road of Haidho in a long, pure green, carefully trimmed wave. On each side it broke into a froth of color ... the red and purple of bougainvillea, the softer colors of hibiscus, the myriad orchids hanging in elegant parasitic grace from banyan trees, the crisp straight lines of

bamboo trees. At the end of the lawn the pickets of a wrought-iron fence separated Embassy grounds from the confusion and noise of the road. (11)

Sears's gaze wanders across the Embassy's meticulously tended lawn, every now and then noticing the beautiful displays of the tropical flora, until it finally descends upon the wrought-iron fence that divides American property from the streets of Haidho. Out on the streets, the Sarkhanese people are engaged in their daily activities; female street vendors are carrying their goods—wood, vegetables, and fish—to the city's market, while male are idly riding bicycles. It should be noted that in this scene, by using Sears's perspective, the authors deliberately make the reader perceive a symbolic contrast between the two spaces respectively inhabited by Americans and by the Sarkhanese: the US Embassy's estate is depicted as an exotic garden that is ordered, clean, and beautifully adorned with tropical flowers, whereas the streets of Haidho replete with the local people are described as a sort of chaos that is noisy, uncivilized, confused, and dirty. The ugly American characters such as Ambassador Sears, Joe Bing—a US public information officer—and others that the authors attack in the novel are public servants in Sarkhan, who regard the Asian country as America's exotic resort where they can lead easy and luxurious lives. As it is apparent in Sears's remark that Sakhanese are "[s]trange little monkeys" (12), these American officials are portrayed as arrogant, selfish, racist, and deplorably ignorant of the history and culture of the Asian country where they are

working. They do not make any efforts to learn the native language and only associate with fellow Americans or Europeans, and are disdainful of the indigenous Sarkhanese people. Being in a country so remote from their homeland, they nevertheless hold on to the lifestyles as comfortable and modern as those led in the United States, by exclusively confining themselves within the perimeter of American properties, the Oriental garden or resort that the United States has created in Sarkhan.

The advertisement for recruiting female officers working in Sarkhan that the State Department places in the public spaces of Washington D.C. is also an example of Americans' desire to regard the Southeast Asian country as a tropical resort of sorts. The placard says that serving in the Third World is not only a patriotic act, but also "an opportunity to see exotic and interesting part of the world" (77). At an explanatory meeting, Joe Bing explains to potential employees that the kinds of effort that they will be expected to make in Asia are by no means tough and demanding labour. Bing tells them that even living in so a distant country, American officials will never have to give up any of the comforts and privileges of "the high American standard" that they currently enjoy in the United States (80). For they will "be living with a gang of clean-cut Americans," and there are "commissaries which stocked wholesome American food for Americans stationed all over the world" (80). Bing's discourse is evidently colonialist:



his primary concern is to establish a kind of distant colony in Asia where Americans are able to indulge in luxury, rather than helping the local people who have suffered destitution because of the protracted domestic political instability and the oppression of foreign Imperial powers such as China and Japan.

The allure of an Asian exotic resort is so powerful that even hard-working, honest Americans who serve in Asia with an earnest wish to help the local people are sometimes spoiled by the extravagance that ugly Americans like Bing or European colonialists offer. Among several episodes in which good Americans' efforts are undermined by the errors of corrupt Americans, the story of Thomas Elmer Knox, an expert on poultry husbandry working in Cambodia, presents the most typical case of Lederer-Burdick's attack on America's colonial mentality. In the beginning, Knox appears as a dedicated American, who, unlike most American officials, is eager to go outside the perimeter of the cities and take actions that directly help the poor Cambodian people who toil in small villages. Knox's project is portrayed as altruistic and selfless: he left his successful farm in Iowa to help develop the poultry business in Cambodia, simply because he "like[s] people and chickens" (159), and happily lives and works alongside the local farmers, speaking in Khmer and taking a great delight in mastering Cambodian cooking. Knox's friendly manner and expertise in poultry immediately win the hearts of

the local villagers and his “success, although minor by the standards by which military aid or big economic aid [a]re calculated, [i]s impressive” (158). However, Knox’s lofty aspiration to support Cambodian farmers is completely undermined by a trip to exotic Asian resorts that is offered to him by corrupt diplomats and cooperation from big cities. Knox’s initial purpose to return to the United States in the second year of his service is to “raise hell” (164) in Washington D.C., and criticize incompetent officials serving in Phnom Penh who do not seriously take into consideration small but necessary projects such as his poultry husbandry. Before moving to the States, Knox is offered, by a French diplomat, a tour to visit several Asian countries before stopping at Paris and flying back to Washington as a reward for his efforts in Cambodian villages. Despite his initial hesitation, Knox accepts the offer, deeply enticed by the exotic charms that places like Thai old temples and Taji Mahal evoke: the narrator explains that Knox decides to join the tour, because “[a]ll the exotic words, the suggestions of exotic scenes welled up in his mind” (165). The places that French diplomats and merchants residing in each country take him to are beautiful Asian resorts, presented in manners that appeal to Euro-Americans’ exoticism. It should be noted that the depiction of an Indonesian small village gracefully decorated with tropical flora that Knox visits is strikingly similar to the beautiful garden of US Embassy in Haidho, wherein Ambassador Sears and his staff

enjoy the lifestyles of the high American standard:

The village was like a jewel. Magnificent flowers in more colors than he had ever seen before poured over fences, hung from trees, and climbed up the walls of the native huts. In the largest of the huts, a troupe of Balinese dancing girls were performing. The girls were tiny, and naked to the waist. Behind their ears they wore large red flowers which were like flames against their jet black hair. (166)

The Balinese village possesses the conventional charms that are pleasing to male Orientalists' eyes: the beauty of an uncivilized natural landscape, the primitive housings, kinds of which no longer exist in the States, and the seductive Asiatic women who perform sensual native dancing. Knox is so fascinated by the dance that at the end of the banquet he realizes that "some of the fine edge of his anger ha[s] disappeared" (166). Knox goes back to the United States, moving westward across the continent, and enjoying similar sorts of luxurious entertainment that local officials offer at every stop. In this way, Lederer and Burdick illustrate the ways in which Knox, a devoted American farmer, changes into a mediocrity who, in the end, completely forgets his aspiration to help Cambodian farmers. In so doing, the authors attack Americans' fascination with eroticized images of Asia and the colonial mentality that underpins it. In regard to this, the symbolical significance of Knox's itinerary—the fact that he returns to the USA via Paris instead of flying over the Pacific—is particularly important to note. As a suzerain state of French Indochina, France and its officials are the representatives of the West's colonialism, whose greed and arrogance Lederer and Burdick seemingly criticize. That is,

Thomas Knox is an American who miserably gives in to the temptation of the corrupted European colonialists, an American who has gone to the “wrong” direction.

According to the authors, the United States are losing their battle against Russian communists in the Third World, since those incompetent Americans fail to understand the difficult situations that Sarkhanese people’s are facing, and thus are losing their confidence. On the other hand, Russia sends to Asian countries extremely skilled agents such as Louis Krupitzyn, Russian ambassador to Sarkhan, whose dedication to his country’s mission to spread communism over the Third World exceeds his American counterparts’. Russian agents fluently speak the native language of their target Asian countries, completely adapt themselves to the austere life that the native people are leading, and their cunning tactics rapidly win the hearts of Asian people. It is Lederer–Burdick’s contention that America is failing in Asia, because many Americans serving there are mediocrities who are deplorably blinded by their selfish, colonialist desire to regard Asia as an enticing Oriental resort. In the postscript part of the novel named “A Factual Epilogue,” the authors thus warn the reader that American officials are forgetting their mission and indulge in fulfilling their exoticism: “we have seen [American] embassies in Asia which are so active in the entertainment of VIPs that they resemble tourist agencies” (281).

In this way, Lederer and Burdick seem to attack the imperialistic and racist desires of many American officials who work in Asia, and criticize the colonial mentality of those who regard the Third World as their oriental resort. In developing their attack on those ugly American characters, the authors describe a few genuinely heroic Americans and praise their selfless, determined efforts to “protect” Sarkhanese from the influence of the communists and bring to the undeveloped country economic growth and democracy.

In contrast to the depraved American officials who seldom leave the richest and most comfortable urban part of the country, and who are exclusively engaged in bureaucratic paperwork and sumptuous cocktail parties, those hardworking Americans such as Ambassador MacWhite, Colonel Edwin B. Hillandale, Major James Wolchek, and a few others voluntarily go to the most undeveloped, often perilous regions of the country to work alongside the indigenous villagers. In addition, they willingly sacrifice their own welfare and accommodate themselves to the culture and the lifestyles of Sarkhanese people to win their confidence. As MacWhite—the successor of Ambassador Sears—explains in his letter to Washington, these courageous Americans work for the real interests of the [Sarkhanese] people [...] not just in the interest of propaganda” (267).

The same MacWhite’s letter warns the authorities in Washington that if the United States continues to behave according to its selfish, imperialistic desires it will lose their battle

against Russian communists in the Asian theatre: “to the extent that our foreign policies is humane and reasonable, it will be successful. To the extent that it is imperialistic and grandiose, it will fail” (267).

Nevertheless, in spite of Lederer–Burdick’s ostensible opposition to the ugly American characters’ racist/colonialist desires, by examining the novel’s representation of Asian characters, critics have pointed out that the authors possess a racist mindset similar to those ugly characters whom they criticize, and that their view of Asia/Vietnam is closely related to the long-held hostility toward non-whites in the dominant Euro-American culture. Surveying US Vietnam War literary works published by the mid-1980s, Timothy Lomperis argues that the most problematic nature of US representations of the Vietnamese people is their scarcity, the fact that there are hardly any sensitive portrayals of the local citizens and soldiers in proportion to the abounding, detailed depictions of the suffering of American soldiers. Besides, if there are any attempts on the part of US writers to bring the Vietnamese people to the foreground of their stories, they, more often than not, end up reproducing superficial, stereotypical characters, due to US writers’ lack of understanding in the history and culture of Vietnam:

The images of Asians presented in the literature are so muted that there really are no dominant images. Thus if any misperceptions of the Vietnamese have grown out of the literature, they have come out most fundamentally from the literature’s very lack of perceptions of the Vietnamese. In the literature to date, they are

either simple and childlike or devious and treacherous.<sup>38</sup>

Lomperis then considers *The Ugly American* to be one of the few US novels that “make attempts at integrating the Vietnamese and their culture into their stories, not always with great success.”<sup>39</sup> According to Lomperis, the authors’ efforts to “demonstrate the application of Maoist theory to Asian poverty,” and their attack on “the glaring incompetence and ignorance of the American foreign policy establishment in failing to come to grips with it [the Vietnamese communist force]” was provocative in the late 1950s, but “today it sounds too didactic.”<sup>40</sup> Richard Drinnon more specifically discusses Lederer–Burdick’s problematic representation of Asian people in the novel, and contextualizes it in broader US cultural history, especially white Americans’ long–running hostility toward Native Americans. Drinnon argues that although the novel romanticizes the friendship between the heroic Americans and the Sarkhanese people, its description of Asian characters are penetrated by the authors’ “covert” racism toward Asians, and he identifies Lederer–Burdick’s racism as an update of “Indian–Hating” that has traditionally runs through Anglo–American culture.<sup>41</sup> Renny Christopher’s argument is in line with Drinnon’s. Examining the Asian characters—both hostile and friendly—

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<sup>38</sup> Timothy Lomperis, *“Reading the Wind”: The Literature of the Vietnam War* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987) 74.

<sup>39</sup> Lomperis 75.

<sup>40</sup> Lomperis 75.

<sup>41</sup> Richard Drinnon, *Facing the West: the Metaphysics of Indian–Hating and Empire Building* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980) 375.

appearing in the novel and comparing them with the representations of Asians in US culture since the mid–nineteenth–century, Christopher contends that the author’s view of Asia and its people is indisputably racist and ethnocentric, and that the novel’s Sarkhanese characters are no other than a reproduction of “Asian Stereotypes” that preceding US writers have created in their writings about Asia.<sup>42</sup>

Taken together, Drinnon’s and Christopher’s critique of Lederer–Burdick’s racism/ethnocentrism complement John Hellmann’s discussion that aptly identifies an American cultural framework in which the authors composed their exposition of Sarkhan/Vietnam. Referring to Sacvan Bercovitch’s classical study of New England puritans’ peculiar “political sermon,”<sup>43</sup> Hellmann regards Lederer–Burdick’s vehement attack on the ugly Americans as Cold War version of American jeremiad and locates the narrative of *The Ugly American* within the tradition of America’s myth of the western frontier. In particular, Hellmann draws upon Bercovitch’s argument that the American jeremiad is penetrated by an “unswerving faith”<sup>44</sup> in America’s errand, and that its affirmative energy has served to propel New England Puritans’ church–state to expand its territory into the western frontier and ultimately to transform itself into a highly modernized empire. Hellman explains that jeremiad is a “political–sermon form” of the

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<sup>42</sup> Christopher 167, 169, and 192–201.

<sup>43</sup> Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1978) xvi, and passim.

<sup>44</sup> Bercovitch 6.



New England Puritans that “survived in the political rhetoric of the formative years of the republic,” and that “has continued to be a central ritual of American culture.”<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, “[c]ombining a criticism of contemporary errors and visions of future disaster with an affirmation of the correctness of the traditional character and purpose of the American ‘errand,’” American jeremiad has enabled its speakers and writers to convey a strong moral message that is “at once conservative and progressive, demanding of each generation that they return to the way of the fathers and rededicate themselves to the special mission of the culture.”<sup>46</sup>

As Puritans conceived the wilderness of the New World not only to be a physical space but also a symbolic locus wherein they were to fulfil the mission of building the City upon a Hill, Lederer and Burdick places the land of Vietnam/Sarkhan in America’s mythical geography. In other words, in the authors’ vision Vietnam is imagined as an extension of the New World wilderness, where a new generation of Americans re-enact the mythic fathers’ heroic endeavour. Thus, in Lederer–Burdick’s novel the ugly American characters such as Ambassador Sears, Bing, and others, who reside in the cities exclusively designed for foreign diplomats and Sarkhanese bureaucrats, and who indulge in the luxurious lifestyles of European colonialists therein, are presented as apostates

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<sup>45</sup> Hellmann 21.

<sup>46</sup> Hellmann 21.

who have forgotten America's errand in Asia. Likewise, second-rate Americans such as Knox and Captain Boing—a naval officer who ruins US military's plan to supply special weapons to its Asian allies, by yielding to the seduction of a female Chinese secret agent—are described as perverts who succumbed to the lure of the evil Communists. It should be noted that, in ways that make a drastic contrast with those corrupted Americans, Lederer and Burdick usher into the novel genuinely heroic American characters who represent the virtues and strenuous efforts of mythic fathers in the western frontier. The authors admire the American heroes such as Ambassador MacWhite, Homer Atkins, Edwin B. Hillendale alias The Ragtime Kid, and others as genuine Americans who retains the "traditional" morals of the mythic fathers, and who strive to fulfil an updated American mission to bring to the Asian wilderness freedom, democracy, enlightenment, and a free market economy—a set of values and economic prosperity that the United States claims to have established in its homeland in their superior forms than those of any other countries.

A close analysis of the character of Major James Wolchek—one of the American heroes of the novel—will illuminate further the ways in which Lederer-Burdick describe Vietnam/Sarkhan/Asia in terms of America's dominant mythology. In the beginning of the chapter titled "The Iron of the War"—the first of the two episodes in

which Wolchek plays a central role—the narrator explains that Major Wolchek, alias Tex, is a veteran of World War II and Korean War, whereupon he was awarded Silver Star, Bronze Medal, and Purple Hearts “with cluster” (115). The word, “iron,” in the title of the episode thus literally indicates a few bullets that Wolchek received during both wars, and that he still lodges in his body. Plus, it figuratively speaks of the US officer’s determined, cast-iron will as well as his great physical strength to defeat the evil fascist and communist foes. It should be noted that Wolchek was one of the members of the paratroopers who “were dropped in the early darkness of D-Day behind the Normandy beaches”(117), and thus embodies America’s triumphant victory over Nazi-Germany. Lederer and Burdick even mitigate the frustration of the standoff of Korea War and attempt to transform it into America’s heroic battle against Chinese Communists by narrating Wolchek’s fierce resistance to the enemy’s massive surprise attack, and his subsequent imprisonment in the Communists’ camp.

The brief account of Wolchek’s personal history that precedes the episode has a greater symbolical significance than merely relating his military service records. By depicting him as a veteran of the previous wars, who in particular experienced America’s glorious victory in WW II—a historical moment in which the United States demonstrated its exceptional might and goodness, defeating the evil forces of German

Nazis and Imperial Japan—the authors attempt to present Wolchek as an offspring of mythic frontier warriors. For, as it is particularly symptomatic in John Wayne’s career trajectory, WW II has been closely associated with Indian War in America’s mythical historiography. Wayne, who had already risen to stardom through his iconic roles as heroic Western gunmen by the early 1940s, obtained a greater fame during and after the war via the huge box-office success of WW II movies such as *Flying Tigers* (1942) and *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1948), in which he starred as courageous US commanders. As recreated by Wayne—“a kind of folk hero, his name an idiomatic expression, a metaphoric formula or cliché that instantly invoked a well-recognized set of American heroic virtues”<sup>47</sup>—the brave Indian War rangers such as Captain Kirby York in *Fort Apache* (1948) or Ethan Edwards in *The Searchers* (1956) and WW II soldiers like Lieutenant Colonel Benjamin Vandervoot in *The Longest Day* (1962)—the Commanding Officer of the airborne landing of Normandy—were almost identical in the then US public’s mind.<sup>48</sup>

The authors’ intention to present Wolchek as a legitimate heir to the heritage of mythic frontiersmen becomes even clearer when one examines the contrast that they establish between the American soldier and French military officers. Wolchek visits

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<sup>47</sup> Slotkin 518.

<sup>48</sup> The symbolic association between Indian War rangers and World War II GIs will also be discussed in Chapter Two and Three, in which I examine US Vietnam War fictions that narrate GI-protagonists’ escape from the Vietnamese battlefield.

Vietnam as an American advisor to the French Army in its finale stage of the battle against Viet Minh guerrilla force, when all the important French forts are gradually taken over by its enemy. While French Army officials persistently refuse to learn the communists' strategy, vainly regarding themselves as possessing superior weapons and military acumen to their Vietnamese counterpart, Wolchek insists on studying the enemy's strategy by reading the books and articles written by their very foes—Mao Tse-Tung and Ho Chi Minh—so as to contrive an effective counterinsurgency plan that would outsmart Viet Minh's guerrilla warfare. As evident in his remark—"We are fighting a kind of war here that I never read about at Command and Staff College. Conventional weapons just don't work out here. Neither do conventional tactics. [...] We need to fight the way they fight" (124)—Wolchek's insistence upon learning and even adopting the "unconventional" guerrilla stratagem of the Communists clearly sets off his tough, practical, and diligent military manners from French higher-ups' self-conceit and inflexibility. Further to this point, Wolchek's eagerness to acquire the Communists' unorthodox military strategies inevitably evokes the images of American frontier gunmen frequently recreated in US popular media. Richard Slotkin argues that dominant US ideas about the heroic White American soldiers have evolved through what he calls "the ranger mystique"—the myth of courageous Anglo-American Indian War fighters

formulated by the numerous cultural reproductions.<sup>49</sup> In short, the mythic Anglo–Saxon American warriors are considered to be distinguished from both British and French soldiers by the unconventional ways of fighting that they have acquired through the direct contact/conflict with Indians and the harsh conditions of the New World wilderness, and yet they are regarded as distinctly superior to Native Americans by their European blood.<sup>50</sup> Considering Wolchek’s characteristics, it is thus not far–fetched to assert that Lederer–Burdick attempt to place their hero in a direct genealogical line of the mythic frontier warriors, and that they conceive the land of Vietnam as an updated American frontier where the heroic Americans re-enact their ancestors’ great feats.

Wolchek’s direct ancestry is equally important to note in understanding the place of Vietnam/Asia in Lederer–Burdick’s mythic perspective. The narrator explains that although Wolchek seems to be an embodiment of conventional images of the Texan man, he is in fact a son of Lithuanian parents who moved to the United States shortly before his birth, and briefly explains his family history:

His parents had come to Fort Worth from Lithuania two years before Tex was born; they were short, dark, and small–muscled people. They had always dreamed of the American frontier; they found the American magic in Texas. Something about the sun and the food and the climate made their children grow tall and muscular, and all six of the Wolchek children were models of what Texan

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<sup>49</sup> Slotkin 453–61.

<sup>50</sup> Slotkin 455. The ranger mystique will also be discussed in Chapter Three, wherein I investigate the ways in which Tim O’Brien’s *Going After Cacciato* undermines conventional US ideas about masculinity, heroism, and war.

thought Texans look like. Father Wolchek had invested his savings in Fort Worth real estate and made a fortune. He no longer worked with a needle. He was openly proud of the fact that his son was an officer and a fighter (116).

Father Wolckek is an embodiment of American dream: he had left the impoverished homeland, which would subsequently be taken over by German Nazis during WW II and by the Communist force of USSR after the war, came to the United States—the land of freedom that allows one to seek opportunities for success and wealth—and eventually made a fortune therein.

More importantly, however, the Wolcheks' migration to the United States and their son's ensuing journey to Asia symbolically enact the "westward course of empire," a Romantic self-concept that the United States has long held, that resonated with New England Puritans' strong sense of holy mission, and that spurred the nation's westward expansion across the continent as its Manifest Destiny. As it is typically expressed in J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782)—"Americans are the western pilgrims, who are carrying along with them that great mass of arts, sciences, vigor, and industry, which began long since in the east. They will finish the great circle."<sup>51</sup>—generations of American intellectuals have conceived their nation to be the cutting edge of Western civilization that is on a mission to bring the torch of enlightenment to Asia, the world's oldest civilization. After the "official" closure of the

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<sup>51</sup> J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from American Farmer and Other Essays*, ed. Dennis D. Moore (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013) 31.

frontier in the late nineteenth-century, the idea of America as the vanguard of the westward course of empire served as a justification for America's overseas imperial expansion across the Pacific. Employing the discourse that the United States conveys to Asia its "mechanical and scientific ingenuity, industrial progress, ethical nationalism, and constructive revolutionary republicanism,"<sup>52</sup> Americans have managed to conceive their overseas expansion not only to be acquisition of new markets and territorial influence, but also a "matter of world historical significance, [...] a moment of fulfillment for whole human race."<sup>53</sup>

In light of this, one can argue that the Wolcheks' migration from Lithuania to the United States represents the mythic process in which the centre of the world's civilization moves from Europe to America. Wolchek's parents leave Lithuania—a small country in the decadent Old World, which has long suffered the threats of neighbouring Imperial powers—and come to the United States, the land of freedom and possibility, which is immune from the malady of European Imperialism and its old customs. Whereupon they are located in Fort Worth, Texas—originally built as an outpost and fortification against Native Americans' attacks in Texan frontier, it is a symbolical setting that inevitably reminds one of American frontier/Indian War

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<sup>52</sup> James C. Thomson, Jr. Peter W. Stanley, and John Curtis Perry, *Sentimental Imperialists: The American Experience in East Asia* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981) 14.

<sup>53</sup> Thomson, Jr. and et al. 17.



experience—and through years of hard work therein, the Wolcheks transform themselves into authentic Americans. Although the outlook of the parents is somewhat emasculated and even oriental—“short, dark, and small-muscled”—James, their eldest son, is a sturdy and masculine GI, who “look[s] so much like the imaginary Texan” (116). As Major Monet, a French officer, describes him as looking tough and brawny as “whang leather” (115–16)—a rawhide leather strip that is often used to make whips and belts for cowboys—Wolchek’s robust appearance is portrayed in manners that deliberately evoke images of the mythic frontier rangers. Likewise, Wolchek’s journey from the United States to Vietnam is described in terms of America’s mythic historiography: Wolchek is a reincarnation of the frontier ranger and his tour of duty in Vietnam is conceived to be a part of America’s historical errand to “finish the great circle,” a holy mission to protect Vietnam from the threats of the evil Communists and bring to the uncivilized Asian people America’s democracy, freedom, and industrial progress. To borrow Hellmann’s words quoted above, by employing mythic images of the frontier, the authors depict Wolchek as a genuine American hero, who “return[s] to the way of the fathers and rededicate [himself] to the special mission of the culture.”<sup>54</sup>

Lederer–Burdick’s Sarkhan/Vietnam is, therefore, a “symbolic landscape”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Hellmann 21.

<sup>55</sup> Hellmann 30.

imagined within the framework of America's dominant mythology—an extension of the western frontier discovered in the post-WWII era, where heroic Americans such as Major Wolchek are expected to retrieve/demonstrate their traditional virtues of hard work, austerity, and pioneering spirit. The author's invocation of the mythic images explains the reasons behind the book's huge commercial success and nationwide publicity in the late 1950s. *The Ugly American* underwent twenty printings in the first five months after its publication, was chosen to be the Book-of-the-Month Club selection in October 1958, and eventually sold over three million copies; following the books' success, it "became 'an affair of state' when Senator John F. Kennedy, Clair Engle, and others presented every member of the U.S. Senate with a copy and President Eisenhower read it and appointed a committee to investigate the entire programme."<sup>56</sup>

As Slotkin and Hellmann suggests, in the late 1950s, American intellectuals and media expressed a shared anxiety that the United States was undergoing a drastic change in its national identity: the affluence and materialistic tendencies of the modernity had lead Americans to lose their strong frontier spirit and traditional virtues—such was the general view often discussed in the nation's numerous books, columns and articles about the analysis of the post WWII US society. The pervading sense of anxiety about America's national identity teamed up with the fear about the ever spreading

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<sup>56</sup> Drinnon 374.

Communism augmented by “the loss of China” in 1949, and served to create an atmosphere that would anticipate the success of *The Ugly American*.<sup>57</sup> The authors’ attack on the ugly American characters was welcomed as a convincing criticism of the incumbent Eisenhower administration’s failures in “containing” the Communism in the Third World, since it aptly responded to the public’s concern about America’s changing national identity. By asserting that the government’s ineffectual diplomacy was a result of mediocre American officials who had abandoned their faith in America’s historical errand, Lederer–Burdick represented the then dominant view about US society and the political stagnation in the post WW II era. At the same time, the authors’ account of heroic Americans serving/fighting in Asian frontier presented a vision that expresses the then public’s demand for strong leadership in politics and its desire to regain what had been imagined as the nation’s traditional virtues in America’s dominant mythology.

In examining the ways in which Lederer–Burdick’s mythic narrative framework is related to their “covert” racism, it is particularly important to note that the authors describe the ugly characters as exceptions and heroic ones as genuine Americans true to the nation’s peculiar characteristics. Although in the novel the ugly American characters are criticized for their colonialist/racist mind-set, they are consistently portrayed as exceptions or traitors who had forsaken the frontier spirit and strong sense of mission

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<sup>57</sup> Hellmann 19–20. Slotkin 447–53.

deeply inscribed in the nation's culture. In other words, rather than examining the ugly Americans' detestable attitudes and behaviours in Asia as an indication of the problems inherent in the history and the culture of the United States—e.g. Euro-Americans' "internal colonialism"<sup>58</sup> toward Native Americans and their racism against ethnic minorities—Lederer and Burdick consider them to be the peculiar symptoms of those who are affected by the disease of corrupt European culture. According to the authors, colonialism and racism are European phenomena that do not exist in American culture.

This becomes clearer when one compares Major Wolchek's episode with Thomas Knox's. The Wolcheks' journey takes a course completely opposite to Thomas Knox's trip: while the Wolcheks enact the empire's westward migration by moving from Europe to America and then to Asia, Knox culturally reverses the course by travelling from Asia to Europe, thereby disgracefully regressing from a selfless, dedicated American farmer working in Asian frontier to an ugly American who embraces European modes of colonialism. In Lederer–Burdick's mythic perspective, Americans are thus imagined as a people who carry with them the fruit of the most progressive Western civilization, and who strive hard to bring it to Vietnam/Asia. They are conceived to be innately good, diligent, and anti-imperialist, and if they become "ugly," it is only when they are

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<sup>58</sup> John Carlos Rowe, *Literary Culture and U.S. Imperialism: From the Revolution to World War II* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) 5, 6, and *passim*.

affected by the maladies of European colonialism preserved in its Asian colonies. Accordingly, although the authors criticize the ugly American characters' colonialist/racist attitudes, they never question the myth of America's essential goodness, its cultural superiority, and the legitimacy of US intervention in Asia. The authors' view is aptly voiced in a remark that Ramon Magsaysay—the then President of the Republic of Philippines, who once worked with US Armed Forces to suppress Huks' insurgency—addresses to Ambassador MacWhite:

“The simple fact is, Mr. Ambassador, that average Americans, in their natural state, if you will excuse the phrase, are the best ambassadors a country can have,” Magsaysay said. “They are not suspicious, they are eager to share their skills, they are generous. But something happens to most Americans when they go abroad. [...] Many of them, against their own judgment, feel that they must live up to their commissaries and big cars and cocktail parties. But get an unaffected American, sir, and you have an asset. And if you get one, treasure him—keep him out of the cocktail circuit, away from bureaucrats, and let him work his way” (108).

By using the sympathetic Asian politician's voice, what the authors attempt to authorize is the myth that Americans are “natural[ly]” good, as well as the discourse that insofar as Americans are “unaffected” by European modes of colonialism, their presence is vital to Asia's development and its battle against the Communism.

It is precisely this unconditional faith in America's goodwill and errand that enables Lederer and Burdick to exert their racism. In *The Ugly American*, by borrowing various characters' voices, the authors criticize the failures of American policies in Asia.

However, all the questions that appear to be convincing are made by “good” American characters such as MacWhite, Wolchek, and Hillandale. On the other hand, when indigenous Asian characters express their anger at US intervention in their homeland, they are described as either being misled by Russian communists or too ignorant to understand the goodwill and benefits that they have received from Americans. The few Asian characters who are regarded as informed enough to criticize the ugly Americans’ incompetency and misdeeds are intellectuals such as Ruth Jyoti, the editor and publisher of an Independent magazine in Setkya [a fictional country in Indochina], and U Maung Swe, a renowned Burmese journalist. The two characters are described as “unusual” Asians; the former is a half European and the latter was educated in the United States (66). Thus, unless they possess either European blood or education, Asians are conceived to be incapable of performing any meaningful actions that lead to solve the predicament their homeland faces.

Sarkhanese women who appear in John Colvin’s episode are a typical example of Lederer–Burdick’s racism. It is also a typical instance in which the authors authorize US intervention in Vietnam by means of their racist representation of Asian people. Colvin is an ex-agent who devoted himself to save Sarkhan from Japanese invasion during WW II. Several years later, He comes back to the remote Southeast Asian country as a successful

owner of powder milk business with an aspiration to improve the condition of poor Sarkhanese villagers, by turning the “otherwise useless” Sarkhanese hillsides into a large stock farm (22). The narrator explains that, just like other heroic Americans, Colvin’s efforts to build a milk distribution centre in Sarkhanese countryside are entirely motivated by his goodwill toward the people of “this strange country” (22). His plan, however, is undermined by a cunning plot of Deong, a Sarkhanese man, who once worked alongside Colvin to fight against Japanese during the previous war, and who has now turned into a local Communist agent, thoroughly brainwashed with their doctrine. Deong traps Colvin by deceiving the village women into believing that the American has put “a powerful aphrodisiac” into his powder milk with the malicious intention of raping their daughters (25–6). Misinformed by the Communist agent, the enraged Sarkhanese women thus attack unarmed, non-resistant Colvin and eventually beat him unconscious: “Colvin ha[s] only five more minutes of a wild and violent nightmare. The tiny, delicate women whom Colvin ha[s] regarded as friends, f[all] upon him like a group of outraged hawks” (27).

The authors describe Sarkhanese as a people essentially innocent who, during WW II, gave Colvin “food and information, and help,” and whose only request to him in return for their hospitality was to “discuss philosophy with them” (20). At the same time,

however, what Lederer and Burdick actually imply in this episode is the denial of Asian people's ability/right to determine the fate of their own homeland. By describing the Sarkhanese villagers who are readily misled by the Communist agent, the authors in fact reproduce a image of Asian people as ignorant savages who lack acute discernment in judging good from evil: Sarkhanese/Vietnamese are not able to understand Americans' goodwill and efforts, and are easily duped by the evil Communists. Worse still, they would at any time turn into an uncontrollable violent mob like agitated animals, if it weren't for America's close supervision. In this way, Lederer–Burdick's covert racism works to deprive Sarkhanese/Vietnamese of their agency and justify America's presence in Indochina. Imagined within the framework of an America's dominant mythic historiography, Sarkhan/Vietnam portrayed in *The Ugly American* is a space where Americans are able to preserve their hegemony over Asians, while ostensibly performing heroic actions to protect them from the forces of evil.

### **Vietnam as an Updated Indian Battlefield: Moore's *The Green Berets***

As examined in the very beginning of the chapter, in *The Green Berets* Robin Moore described the land and the people of Vietnam in terms heavily loaded with the images of the western frontier. While in *The Ugly American*, the authors carefully avoid depicting Americans' violence over the indigenous people of Indochina, in his Vietnam combat novel, Moore is unrestrained in describing the Special Forces men's violent actions. The



land of Sarkhan/Vietnam in *The Ugly American* is a reincarnation of the agricultural frontier, where heroic Americans, such as Farmer John Colvin, strive to cultivate the “otherwise useless” wilderness, thereby helping the innocent and ignorant native people; the Vietnamese terrain in *The Green Berets* is an update of the Indian War battlefield, where a group of US elite soldiers re-enact their predecessors’ savage warfare, by engaging in a fierce battle against the Indian-like Vietnamese communist guerrillas.

I have already summarized Renny Christopher’s discussion about Moore’s racism toward the Vietnamese people, enacted through his stereotypical representation of Asian characters. Further to this point, it should be noted that Moore authorizes the Green Berets’ violence by demoting its Vietnamese counterpart into a racially inferior other. Although Special Force men are described as tough and ruthless experts of counterinsurgency who do not hesitate to use violent actions to achieve their aim, they are clearly distinguished from the Vietnamese soldiers by their superior European blood. For instance, in the first episode of the novel, when Lieutenant Chau—a South Vietnamese subordinate of Lieutenant Colonel Kornie, the hero of the episode—discovers an NLF infiltrator in his own troop, the RVN [Republic of Vietnam] soldiers try to make the suspect confess his implication in the enemy’s spy mission by severely torturing him. Green berets, however, are opposed to their inhuman method, although

they do not intervene in the interrogation to stop the torture. Disgusted by their brutality, Kornie expresses his contempt for South Vietnamese soldiers: “Ngoc’s [the South Vietnamese expert on torture] methods work on some of these people but I do not like torture” (49). Later, when interrogating another Vietcong prisoners, Special Forces men demonstrate their superior sense of justice, prudence, and power of civilization by using polygraph instead of torture. This type of episodes that abounds in the novel reinforces the idea of Americans’ cultural superiority over the Vietnamese. Further to this point, Kornie’s and his American comrades’ disapproval of the Vietnamese soldiers’ misdeed is evidently racist. When Ngoc insists on torturing his Vietcong prisoners, a member of the Green Berets argues that brutality is an essential characteristic of the Orientals that cannot be cured by any means: “Now we get the Oriental mind at work. [...] If we [Americans] stay here for twenty years we won’t change them, and God save us from getting like them” (54). By attributing the Vietnamese soldiers’ excessive use of violence to their racial inferiority, and regarding it as their incorrigible trait such as “the Oriental mind,” *The Green Berets* divest the Vietnamese of their ethnic integrity and degrade them to a barbaric people of lower racial grade. In this way, by describing the Vietnamese characters as an essentially inferior race that would anytime commit irrational acts of violence if it were not for Americans’ supervision and punishment—in

a manner that reminds one of Lederer–Burdick’s enraged Sarkhanese mob in John Colvin’s episode—Moore endorses the United States’ control over the land and the people of Vietnam.

In further examining Moore’s representation of Vietnam as an extension of the western frontier, I will especially focus upon an episode called “Home to Nannette,” the longest but one narrative of all the Green Berets’ tales in the novel. The protagonist of the episode is Major Bernie Arklin, and the story narrates his secret mission in Laotian mountains. Arklin solely goes to a certain Laotian mountainous region to wage guerrilla warfare against Pathet Lao, Laotian communist force that is closely associated with the North Vietnamese and the NLF [National Liberation Front (of South Vietnam)] forces. In fighting off the enemy, Arklin trains and cooperates with the Meo tribesmen, an indigenous people who live in the Indochinese mountains. In order to win their confidence, Arklin has to live among the Meo people, sojourning in their village, wearing their loincloth, eating their food, and marrying their woman.

Narrating the protagonist’s adventure in the interior of Indochinese hinterland, “Home to Nannette” is a typical example of Moore’s admiration of the Special Forces men’s tough and ruthless actions in the Third World frontier. As such, a close analysis of Arklin’s “going native” story leads us to illuminate the ways in which Moore authorizes

US violence upon Asian people by associating the images of the Indian War warrior with his hero. As I will elaborate presently, Arklin is depicted as a kind of feral hero who is willing to cast away the comforts of modernity and to adopt the Meo tribesmen's primitive ways of life for the ultimate purpose of carrying out his clandestine mission. The hero's ability to accommodate himself to the severe conditions of Asian wilderness, the primordial lifestyle of the Montagnards, and the guerrilla tactics of the enemy is reminiscent of Lederer-Burdick's Major Wolchek, in particular his eagerness to adapt the Communists' strategies. Like the authors' of *The Ugly American*, Moore also describes the protagonist's great flexibility in adjusting to the unorthodox, anti-modern styles of battle as a sign that indicates his genealogical association with the frontier Indian War fighter.

However, whereas Lederer and Burdick refer to US military action in Indochina in quite a moderate way, Moore conspicuously dramatizes the violent actions that the protagonist and the Meo tribesmen carry out in their battle against the Pathet Lao. Hellmann argues that if the Green Berets' mission expounded in the novel—protecting Asian people from the Communists—represents the public ideals of America's communal mission, Moore's fascination with his heroes' excessive use of violence

reflects “private desires lurking just beneath, even within, those ideals.”<sup>59</sup> That is, it embodies Americans’ hidden, unconscious longings to escape the restrictions of society and to indulge in the pleasure of violence and sex in an imaginative setting that endorses their dark desires. At the same time, however, although the story enacts Americans’ perverted dream to indulge in primitive impulses through Arklin’s violent and sensual adventure in Laotian wilderness, Moore attempts to preserve the traditional values of society that define the United States as a highly modernized, Western civilization derived from the Puritan’s church–state. In spite of the protagonists’ apparent deviation from the convention of US society, Moore’s tales of the Greens Berets’ savage battles are not as subversive of the community’s moral codes as it seems at first glance. Or rather, in Moore’s Vietnam combat novel, most typically in the story of “Home to Nannette,” there is a tension between the author’s desire to fulfil the dream of anti-modern, anti-social escapade and his wish to sustain the traditional values—in particular heterosexual white men’s hegemony over other races and genders—that may well be jeopardized by the protagonist’s seemingly heathenish actions. I would argue that by using the conventions of combat romances Moore attempts to circumvent the crisis—the disintegration of America’s hegemonic societal codes—while narrating/endorsing the Green Beret’s “going native” fantasy. A close analysis of “Home to Nannette”—in particular, the

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<sup>59</sup> Hellmann 57.

tension between the two impulses—thus inevitably leads us to examine the traditional values of US society that the author tried to preserve. If, as Christopher has it, the plot of *The Green Berets* “represent[s] the most influential early view of the war,”<sup>60</sup> it also reflects conventional US ideas about race, gender, sexuality, and masculinity in the early Vietnam War period.

The narrative of “Home to Nannette” seems to be peculiar in all the episodes of *The Green Berets* in that it is the only story that the narrator does not claim to have witnessed at first hand. At the very beginning of the episode, Moore explains that he is going to recount a story of Bernard Arklin, a middle aged, “lean, almost cadaverous looking” Special Forces man, whom he had met in Saigon, and who had just returned from a secret mission in the heart of Laotian mountains (167). Nonetheless, the narrative strategy by which the author tries to claim the authenticity of his story is in fact identical to any other episodes in the novel: Moore presents himself as a reliable narrator who, having been trained and fought alongside the Green Berets, is given access to the most clandestine military matters. Moore tells that when he met Arklin for the time in Saigon, the seasoned soldier of the most secretive military unit initially regarded him with “predictable suspicion” (167). However, upon learning that although Moore is a civilian journalist, he had risked his life along with the Berets in the Vietnamese, Arklin started

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<sup>60</sup> Christopher 209.

to take a friendly attitude toward the narrator. Thus, “[b]y the time he had left Saigon for the United States ten days later, Bernie Arklin had told me [Moore] the story of his life as a revered chief of the hard-fighting, squat, barrel-chested Meo tribesmen of Laos” (167).

In this way, the author explains how he obtained the confidence of the Green Beret, and presents himself as an authority of US counterinsurgency operations, or a private spokesperson for enigmatic Special Forces men, who is going to give the reader otherwise unobtainable pieces of information about the Green Berets’ most covert mission in the heart of Asian wilderness. Whereupon, Moore, the first person narrator of the novel, disappears from the foreground of the story, and the narrative’s focal point smoothly shifts from the author to Arklin, the protagonist, as an anonymous third person narrator starts to relate the protagonist’s adventure in Laotian mountains. Notwithstanding all the author’s efforts to create a plausible narrative solidly based upon reportorial facts, however, “Home to Nannette” comes across as utterly fictitious. This does not mean that the series of events occurring in the episode are decidedly “unrealistic,” but rather suggests that it is because Moore’s tale too comfortably fits into the narrative framework of conventional combat romances.

In particular, the plot of Moore’s story bears a striking similarities to that of the

popular historical novels published in the late nineteenth-century that have been analysed by Amy Kaplan. Kaplan argues that, although the significance of historical novels at the turn of the century have often been overlooked by later critics who characterize the period solely as “Age of Realism,” those “swashbuckling romances” were in fact “the major best-sellers on the earliest published lists from 1895–1902, the period of heated national debate about America’s imperial role,”<sup>61</sup> and served as a great vehicle for the discourse that abetted then US imperialism in the Third World. Often narrating the white American protagonist’s violent actions and romance in a remote kingdom with a strong sense of nostalgia for America’s imagined past, the historical romances such as Stanley J. Weyman’s *Under the Red Robe* (1884), Richard Harding Davis’s *Soldiers of Fortunes* (1897), Charles Major’s *When Knighthood Was in Flower* (1898), and others are a typical example of the ways in which the myth of the frontier reproduced in popular culture contributed to a larger process of US empire building in the turn of the century. By comparing Moore’s story with the general plot of US historical romances that Kaplan delineates, I will examine the similarities between Moore’s interpretation of America’s involvement in Vietnam and the rationale for America’s territorial expansion across the Pacific that the authors of popular historical

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<sup>61</sup> Amy Kaplan, “Romancing the Empire: The Embodiment of American Masculinity in the Popular Historical Novel of the 1890s,” *American Literary History* Vol. 2, No.4 (Winter 1990): 659–90. 660.



novels helped to create in the late nineteenth-century. In so doing, I will also interrogate the ways in which both Moore and the authors of conventional romances inherited from the frontier mythology the racist discourse that authorizes the concept of white Americans' hegemony over other races.

Surveying a number of popular historical romances published during the decade spanning the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Kaplan identifies some basic patterns of plot that many of the novels have in common, and argues that they are closely related to the then dominant discourse that romanticizes the United States' military actions in distant overseas terrains:

The formulaic plot of the romance uncannily parallels the popular narrative of the Spanish–American War as a chivalric rescue mission that in turn rejuvenates the liberator. The historical romance opens with its own lament for the closed frontier, as the hero mopes, discontented with the dwarfed opportunities of his contemporary society. He then seeks an adventure on a primitive frontier abroad, where he falls in love with a beautiful aristocratic woman, often the ruler of a kingdom and sometimes a genteel American. The hero, usually a disinherited, or “natural” aristocrat, both saves the kingdom from falling to its barbaric enemies and thereby modernizing it and liberates the heroine from outdated class constraints by marrying her. The heroine of the novel, an athletically daring New Woman [...] actively abets her own liberation by embracing the hero in marriage. At the end, the hero returns home with his bride, after relinquishing political control of the realm he has freed.<sup>62</sup>

The basic plot of “Home to Nannette” surprisingly resembles that of historical romances of the late nineteenth-century. In the outset, the narrator relates that Arklin's mission in

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<sup>62</sup> Kaplan 666.

the interior of Laotian mountains is the most confidential of all the Special Forces' counterinsurgency operations waged against Communist guerrillas in Southeast Asia, and explains the reason behind the protagonist's lonesome journey into Asian hinterland. Laos was "in theory" neutralized as a result of the Geneva accords in October 1962, and thus if America's military actions therein were uncovered, it would provoke widespread criticism both within and without the States (162). Nevertheless, the US Central Intelligence Agency, the superior organization of the Special Forces, detects signs of Communist Pathet Lao's and its ally, the North Vietnamese's movement to take over the country, and decides to send Arklin, an experienced Beret, to implement covert counterinsurgency to thwart the Communists' conspiracy in Laos. The story covers about a year that starts in June 1963, during which the protagonist sojourns in the interior of the distant Asian country and successfully carries out a massive surprise attack upon Pathet Lao troops based in the mountains. For the reasons summarized above, Arklin has to go to the uncivilized Laotian terrains by himself and organize a guerrilla troop by recruiting native inhabitants of the land. In this way, except for occasional radio correspondences with the CIA headquarters in Bangkok and elsewhere in Asia and supply helicopters thereof, Arklin is completely isolated from the convenience of urban civilization and has to adjust himself to pre-modern lifestyles of the indigenous people whose village he

stays in, and with whom he collaborate. As I mentioned above, in a manner that reminds one of the mythic frontier heroes, Moore describes his protagonist as an extremely dedicated and capable hero who willingly sacrifices all the comforts that the city offers to achieve his aim. The narrator explains that in order to cooperate with the Meo tribesmen—the native inhabitants of the Laotian mountainous areas—Arklin, without hesitation, stays in their village and embraces their styles: “This time he would not be wearing a uniform, but would dress as did his charges—in camouflage suits, miscellaneous clothing and the native loincloth” (168). In addition, just as Lederer and Burdick’s American heroes speak fluent Asian languages, so does Arklin talk with the Meo people in their native tongue: “They [Arkin and Pay Dang, the chief of the Meo tribesmen] greeted each other in Meo, which Arklin had learned to speak fluently [...]” (170).

However, a significant element of the story that is not so obviously present in *The Ugly American*, but apparently exists in both *The Green Berets* and the swashbuckling romances of the late nineteenth-century is a strong sense of rejuvenation that penetrates the protagonists when they embark upon their journey into a remote, uncivilized landscape. Moore’s narrator tells that, immediately before undertaking his mission in the Laotian wilderness, Arklin is elated by the prospect of imminent adventure awaiting him in the days ahead: “In Bangkok, Arklin beg[ins] to feel his first excitement—and a

sense of impending accomplishment—over the opportunity of rejoining the Meo tribesmen at the eastern approaches to the strategic Plain of Jars” (168). Although Arklin does not explicitly enunciate his “own lament for the closed frontier,” it is obvious that the author romanticizes the protagonist’s violent actions in the Indochinese hinterland as America’s heroic adventure set in a new “primitive frontier abroad,” while giving a scornful look at average Americans’ lives in contemporary society. A small conversation between Arklin and Frank Methuan—a Special Forces man, with whom the protagonist is in close contact during the mission—is an instance that demonstrates Moore’s contempt for American military officials whose activities are confined in urban environs. Methuan tells Arklin that kinds of work he is currently occupied with is tough negotiations with the regular Army higher-ups who, out of the fear that Special Forces is violating international treaties, try to impose rigid regulations upon the Green Berets’ actions in Indochina, and then he expresses his desire to escape the tedium of deskwork and fight against Pathet-Lao-Viet-Cong in the wilderness alongside Arklin: “I wish I was up there with you instead of fighting the Saigon-Bangkok-Washington-Pentagon-State-Department war” (186). In fact, Methuan’s remark is the hero’s lament for the closed frontier, vicariously expressed by the grumbling Beret, who is “discontented with the dwarfed opportunities of his contemporary society.” Arklin’s reply to Methuan—

“From what you say, conventional officers sitting in comfortable offices will be writing the reports on Special Forces officers out in the field who are trying to outfight and outsmart the Viet Cong with their hands tied behind their desk” (187)—also serves to romanticize further the imagery of the stalwart hero fighting “out in the field” as opposed to the bureaucratic officials serving in the cities whose primary concern is to save the face of their own institution.

The protagonist’s romance with a young native woman is also a significant element of the plot that “Home to Nannette” shares with the popular historical novels in the nineteenth-century, and deserves a close examination. On the very first day of his sojourn in the Meo village, Pay Dang and his fellow tribesmen insist that Arklin should marry a local woman in order that he can become a trustworthy comrade of their community. Several women willingly offer themselves to mate with Arklin, and the hero chooses Ha Ban, alias Nannette—a beautiful fifteen years old Meo girl, who is merely two years older than his eldest daughter. In spite of his concerns about betraying his beloved wife and children—Arklin accepts the offer, for otherwise the dogged Meo tribesmen would not recognize him as their leader. Arklin initially strives to suppress his “natural desire” and keep his relationship with Nannette “platonic,” although he is deeply attracted to her sexual charm and knows that “he ha[s] a fine woman by any standards”

(177). Nevertheless, as Nannette's ill humour for not being properly treated as his wife causes unrest among the Meo tribesmen, who begin to suspect that the American think lightly of them, Arklin finally gives in and sleeps with her, by drinking three gourds of Meo liquor and paralyzing his "morals and almost inflexible sense of responsibility" (177).

In a way, "Home to Nannette" can be read as an enactment of a white American man's perverted dream to violate the morals of mainstream American white culture. Despite the protagonist's seeming concerns about his American family, it virtually is a tale of a white man who escapes his mid-life crisis at home and regenerates through sensual experience with a seductive, young woman in an exotic, uncivilized landscape—an experience that is ethically untenable in the United States. In America, the protagonist has to assume the role of a respectable father as well as a loving husband of a Christian family, observing the strict moral codes of the society. Therein, he also has to face the fact of aging, the dire prospect of his own decline in the coming future. On the other hand, Moore's Asian landscape allows the middle-aged protagonist to forsake the responsibilities and morals pertaining to living in the western society and unleash secret desires lurking beneath the disguise of a good American father. In the Laotian wilderness, Arklin is able to forget his own age, by becoming a lover of fifteen-year-old girl, who is

almost the same age as his own daughter, and by showing off his sexual powers to “please” and “satisfy” the young bride. The narrator explains that once the protagonist overcomes the ethical dilemma, he not only successfully “consummate[s] his ‘marriage’ to Nannette” but also demonstrates his virility to the Meo tribesmen: “Arklin so thoroughly please[s] and satisfie[s] his young bride that the Meos, seeing her the next day, kn[ow] at once that the American [is] finally one of them. They sla[p] his back whenever he [goes], calling rude suggestions that [are] approved by everyone” (177).

In this, Moore virtually depicts the Meo tribesmen as a people essentially heretical and primitive. As Christopher argues, the author’s portrayal of the indigenous Asian people is decidedly “oversexed.”<sup>63</sup> Indeed, Moore conceives the Meo tribesmen to be savages who are excessively obsessed with sex, and who happily embrace the heathenish practice of polygamy. It should be noted that, in so doing, Moore attempts to differentiate his American protagonist from the barbaric Meo people: the author portrays Arklin as a stoical hero—despite his seeming adjustment to the primitive Asian ways of life—who is “actually restrained by higher sense of natural law that is at one with his true civilized duty.”<sup>64</sup> As I have already examined above, before the protagonist enacts the dream act of the virile lover, Moore deliberately informs the reader that Arklin does this out of

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<sup>63</sup> Christopher 208.

<sup>64</sup> Hellmann 64.

absolute necessity. If the protagonist refuses to marry Ha Bin, he would never be able to fulfil the holy mission of protecting Asia from the evil forces of Communism. For, suggests Moore, the indigenous Asian people are too barbaric to understand the American's selfless acts of goodwill and higher sense of ethic.

I would argue that the protagonist's "marriage" with the native Meo girl carries a larger political significance in Moore's Vietnam combat novel. By depicting a native female who happily embraces an American hero and native males who are more than pleased with their marriage, Moore authorizes Americans' military intervention in Indochina. (The women who are not chosen by the hero ostentatiously express their disappointment.) According to Kaplan, in the popular historical romances of the late nineteenth-century, the heroines who fall in love with American heroes are in effect "spectators" who admire American men's theatrical demonstration of his masculine valour:

The opening duel of *Knighthood*, the last act of violence in the book focuses less on purgative bloodletting than on Mary's [the heroine's] lovestruck stare. Even the climactic battle against the infidels in the remote Holy Land of *Via Crucis* takes place in front of female crusaders, whose queen declares to her knight in the midst of the fray, "Oh what a man you are! What a man."<sup>65</sup>

Further to this point, by making the heroines marrying the protagonists, and leave her homeland for the United States, the writers symbolically legitimated America's "less

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<sup>65</sup> Kaplan 676.



direct” yet “more complete” political as well as economical control over the Third World.<sup>66</sup> For the discourse of America’s indirect control over the Third World was palatable to the then US public who had believed in America’s exceptional goodness, its anti-European, and anti-colonialist nature. Although Arklin does not take Nannette to the United States, the heroines’ unconditional love for the American hero portrayed throughout the entire episode symbolically authorizes the same kind of America’s “less direct” yet “more complete” control of the land and the people of Indochina.

In particular with “Home to Nannette,” the theatrical demonstration of the hero’s bravery is performed not only by Arklin’s great military feats, but also by his sexual prowess. In this, alongside the heroine, even the Meo males serve as spectators who witness the American hero’s virility. As examined above, upon accepting Arklin as their leader, the Meo tribesmen applaud the American’s ability to thoroughly “please” and “satisfy” Nannette. A similar kind of scene occurs in the middle of the episode when Arklin leads his Meo warriors through a rough and troublesome mountainous path back to their village, after successfully carrying out a massive surprise attack upon the Pathet Lao and Viet Cong troops. In spite of the Meo tribesmen’s wish to take an easier shortcut to the hilltop, Arklin insists that they take the difficult, circuitous route so that they can circumvent the enemy’s reprisal ambush, which is very likely to happen along the Meo

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<sup>66</sup> Kaplan 670.

soldiers' usual route. In order to convince the stubborn Meo men of this, Arklin proposes to Pay Dang that he will once again demonstrate his great sexual power to them, if they go back to the village safely by taking his path: "Tell the men I promised Ha Bin I'd give her the biggest loving she ever had before daylight tomorrow." Arklin slapped his right bicep with his left hand, clenching his fist at the end of a rigid forearm. The gesture was universally unmistakable" (198). The Meo tribesmen cheerfully accept Arklin's offer, and thus agree to take his route. The scene suggests that the Meo tribesmen's loyalty to the American is not only realized by his possession of the various technologies of modern warfare that they apparently lack, but also by his masculine powers—here the abilities to kill and the abilities to "please" the woman are closely related—that even the furious savage warriors as they are impressed with. Considering the fact that Arklin and Nannette are the only couple whose heterosexual relationship Moore dramatizes in the episode, one can argue that Meo males are always assigned the role of impotent audience, who function to witness/applaud the American hero's masculine abilities and thus symbolically help to endorse America's close supervision of themselves.

In this way, Moore creates his Indochinese wilderness as a space that permits his protagonist to indulge in "primitive impulse and revolt against institutional authority," thereby fulfilling "the deepest American fantasy of an escape from society to nature,

from the constraints of the conscious mind into the indulgence of the unconscious.”<sup>67</sup>

Simultaneously, however, Moore carefully preserves the racial hierarchy that he creates between the white American and the indigenous Asian people. It should be noted that the heroine is a half French woman whose father is a certain French soldier who came to the Laotian mountains in the early days of France’s battle against Viet Minh, hence her French name, Nannette. Thus, although Arklin observes that “Nannette [...] [is] far more Meo than European in attitude,” she does not completely belong to the savage Meo people (176). Her “lighter colored” skin, “smaller breast,” “delicately boned” body—i.e. a trace of European blood—and linguistic ability in French distinguish the heroine from the normal Meos. In other words, Ha Bin alias Nannette is too noble to marry a Meo man, and only a heroic American man such as Arklin, whose virility and intellect by far excel the natives, is entitled to marry her. Thus, Moore carefully avoids the crisis of miscegenation—Euro-Americans’ complete integration into racially inferior others—a nightmare that lurks in white men’s fantasy of “going native.” Early in the episode, Arklin receives “a complete selection of contraceptive devices, for both male and female use” as a part of his supply kit from the headquarters, and decides to “start giving Nannette a little advanced training in certain intimate female matters” (183). On one hand, Arklin’s decision to teach the native woman the practice of contraception is one of

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<sup>67</sup> Hellmann 64.

the Beret's civic actions to improve the lives of the uncivilized people. On the other, however, one can argue that it is also the author's deliberate attempt to circumvent the dreadful possibilities of miscegenation, the merging of the white American's purely European blood with the savage Asians'.

In addition to the protagonist's relationship with the Meo heroine, Moore's portrayal of the Meo tribesmen as the American hero's loyal ally in his battle against the Communist foes also merits attention in order to understand further the author's interpretation of Cold War geopolitics in the Third World. In short, by making his hero sympathize with the Meo tribesmen and portraying them as a genuine indigenous people of Indochina who bravely battle against the evil Communists, Moore in effect deprives the Vietnamese and Laotian people of their nativeness, or indigeneity, their legitimate right to take charge of their own homeland. In contrast to the Vietnamese people—regardless of whether they are America's ally or not—whom the author often portrays as coward, corrupt and at times excessively brutal, “the hardy” (168) Meo tribesmen are praised by the author, for all their ignorance and lack of sophistication, as furious warriors whose primitive physical strength and strong will to fight live up to those of the masculine American hero. The narrator explains that the Green Berets do not work with the Laotian regular army, since they are cowards who are not qualified to fight kinds of

war that the courageous Americans currently engage in: “The Laotian government soldiers [are] quelled by the mere mention of Viet-Minh—they believ[e] implicitly in their savagery and invincibility—and [are] paralyzed with the fear at the idea of fighting them [...]” (193). On the other hand, The Meo tribes men are depicted as undaunted fighters who take a great delight in the excitement of the battle with “their hated enemy” (195). When Arklin and his Meo soldiers launch a surprise attack on the enemy, the Meo tribesmen demonstrate their intrepid spirit: “Pay Dang scream[s] with joy as he pour[s] fire into the Communists pinned down on the ditch. The exultant shouts of the Meo c[an] be heard even over the heavy firing” (194).

In this process, one can once again find an interesting parallel between Moore’s Indochina and the remote, exotic kingdoms depicted in US popular historical novels of the late nineteenth-century. Kaplan argues that the distant lands in which the swashbuckling heroes stay are virtually a conflation of the European empires and the uncivilized Third World, in which the hero tries to rescue the noble heroine and her people from the forces of both “old-world ‘tyranny’—empire—and new-world ‘anarchy’—revolution.”<sup>68</sup> This is, for instance, true of Graustark, “one of those many infernal little kingdoms,” where the native men “fought like Sam Patch”<sup>69</sup> in George

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<sup>68</sup> Kaplan 670.

<sup>69</sup> Quoted in Kaplan 669.

Barr McCutcheon's novel *Graustark* (1901) and the republic of Olancho, the setting of *Soldiers of Fortune*, "one of those little republic down there,"<sup>70</sup> in South America, where the protagonist dies defending his Spanish lady against the local nationalists' uprising. On one hand, the then popular authors' depiction of the Third World revolutionaries as barbaric anarchists in effect divests them of their cause for national independence: they are portrayed as savages apparently lacking the abilities to govern a sovereign state. On the other, the American protagonist is described as being endowed with the wisdom of the old world, masculine power and a strong will to spread the ideas of democracy and freedom—characteristics that are befitting an authentic American hero, who bravely fights against the anarchists, while freeing the people of the uncivilized land from the fetters of old customs and superstitions such as pre-modern European modes of absolute monarchism. Moore's Arklin is also a hero who is on a special rescue mission that is at once conservative and revolutionary. Considering the fact that Nannette is a daughter of a French soldier, the Meo' village is in a way imagined as an extension of old French empire. It is currently in danger of invasion by Pathet Lao and Viet Cong forces—the anarchic revolutionaries. Arklin's mission is to protect the heroine and her people from the threat of the evil force, by leading a band of courageous native males. Arklin's action to protect the former French colony from the revolutionaries to some extent vindicates

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<sup>70</sup> Quoted in Kaplan 670.

European powers' colonialism in Asia as well as ensuing control of the land by the United States, as France's successor. In so doing, the author tries to set off the Green Beret from corrupt French colonialists, by making him demonstrate abilities that Europeans do not possess—his great flexibility in adapting himself to the lifestyles of Meo tribesmen, his anti-colonial, democratic nature to seemingly treat the indigenous Asians as his equals, "his established policy of being one with the Meo," and so forth (208). At the same time, the protagonist engages in civilizing missions to educate the ignorant Meo people and liberate them from old customs that have continued to harm their wellbeing, and that have prevented their community developing into a modern society. One example of such actions is Arklin's effort to "reestablish certain sanitary practices, such as the use of latrine" that were completely abandoned once French left the land (179). Upon arriving the village, the protagonist is disappointed by the ways in which the buildings and sanitary infrastructures that Europeans installed therein before have been poorly maintained. Recalling a lament of a certain French missionary who once attempted to teach the Meo tribesmen "a true religion"—"when the French left and these men returned [the Meo people who had converted to Christianity] to their tribes, it was common knowledge that they had reverted all too quickly to loincloths [...]"—Arklin embarks upon civilizing missions to enlighten the indigenous people and

emancipate them from harmful old practices and poor infrastructure, a tough task that Americans' predecessors, the French, have never succeeded (179). Although Arklin leaves the Meo village after establishing America's counterinsurgency post therein and thus America's errand in Asian frontier is still on its way, Moore's text suggests that the native Meo people do not possess abilities to take control of their own fate, and thus Americans have to intervene and prevent them from regressing into their old barbaric selves.

In this way, Moore's Vietnam/Indochina is a landscape romanticized in manners convenient for the American to play a heroic role therein. *The Green Berets* (1968), the novel's cinematic adaptation, in which John Wayne starred as Colonel Kirby—a persona that combined the protagonists of several episodes in the novel and the heroic western gunmen and WWII commanders Wayne himself had played in previous films—closes with a scene wherein Kirby and Humchak, a Vietnamese war orphan whom the Berets rescued, walks along the coast of South China Sea, their silhouette standing out in the orange-red glow of the sun setting upon the sea—an apparent geographical incongruity.<sup>71</sup> Originally inaugurated by Wayne himself, who had intended to produce a film that paid tribute to Special Forces men in Vietnam, the film adaptation of Moore's Vietnam combat novel achieved a commercial success. However, it was severely

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<sup>71</sup> *The Green Berets*, dir. John Wayne, and Ray Kellogg, Warner Brothers Pictures. 2005.



censured by critics for its failure to convey the reality of the on-going war, immediately after its release. Most notably, Roger Ebert rebuked the producers of the film for playing down the complex realities pertaining to the war and interpreting them in simplistic terms of “Cowboys and Indians.”<sup>72</sup> Although the film version at times dramatizes Special Forces men’s relationship with the Vietnamese people in rather sentimental ways, its will to interpret Vietnam in terms of America’s own national mythology certainly echoes that of Moore’s original novel.

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<sup>72</sup> Roger Ebert, “The Green Berets (26 June 1968),” *Roger Ebert.com*, 13 May 2013 <<http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-green-berets-1968>>.

## Chapter Two: Criticising the Metaphor of Vietnam as a Diseased land: Stephen Wright's *Meditations in Green*

### Colonialists' Illusion: The land and the People of Vietnam as Diseased

André Malraux's novel *La Voie Royale* (1930) is a story of two European explorers, which the author wrote based on his own experience of attempted smuggling of historical bas-reliefs from a small temple in Banteai Srei, a small village to the northeast of Angkor Wat. In this novel written by Sartre's contemporary and compatriot more than twenty years before France's colonial control over Vietnam was brought to an end in Dien Bien Phu, one can find an instance of colonialist imaginative geography that Americans would later carry on in their description of Vietnam: the imagery of Vietnam as a "diseased land."

When the two protagonists—Claude, a young Frenchman and Perkin, an experienced Dutch explorer—are about to land on the Cambodian shore, the first thing that occurs to Claude's mind is the misgiving about catching a tropical disease, malaria. Malraux quietly builds up a feeling of tension by creating a scene in which the young protagonist's anticipation of as well as apprehension about coming adventures are paralleled with the bobbing sensation of the jolting boat, and depicts the hovering Indochina landscape seen by the hero as follows:

Claude gazed with fascination at this foretaste of the jungle that awaited him, overwhelmed by the smell of the silt spreading slowly in the sun, the insipid foam

drying, the animals rotting, the limp appearance of amphibians clinging to the branches. Every time there was a gap in the leaves, he tried to glimpse the towers of Angkor Wat against the trees twisting in the wind from the lake, but in vain: the leaves, red with twilight, closed again over *this malarial life*.<sup>73</sup>

We should note that the protagonist does not only feel a premonition of physical deterioration in a severe natural environment, but also identifies the disease with the foreign land. Hence, the elements of nature are blended into one malignant, alien whole: “this malarial life.” The novel is in fact replete with the images of the Indochinese land as a disease-ridden, menacing jungle. The treasures of ancient Buddhist relics are deeply hidden in “the shapeless jungle” (49), and therefore the two Europeans have to “sink into this ferment” just “like a man sinking into illness” and are surrounded by “the force of darkness” (59). Further to this point, the sense of dread that the protagonist feels toward the land is also directed to the people, in much the same way as the representations of insect-ridden China that Sartre remembers and condemns prompted Europeans to harbour feelings of contempt and hostility toward Chinese people. Later, when the two protagonists embark upon their journey, the native villages where the expedition bivouacs are figured as enormous vermin: “For four days, making camp near villages that grew out of the jungle, like their wooden Buddhas, like the palm thatch on their huts, emerging from the ground like monstrous insects ...”(59). The sense of terror that the

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<sup>73</sup> André Malraux, *The Way of the Kings*, trans. Howard Curtis (London: Hesperus Press, 2005) 41, emphasis added.

two explorers feel toward the foreign land may reflect the physical hardship that Europeans have to undergo in an unfamiliar environment. However, when we consider the depiction of animalistic or insect-like “savage tribes” that we find elsewhere in the story, we have to assume that the description of South-eastern jungle cited here is drawn by an artist who uncritically embraces colonialist imaginative geography, who, as Sartre and Said discuss, helps to formulate the hostile visions of the indigenous people and their home land.<sup>74</sup> The observer’s sense of hostility and dread is projected reciprocally onto the land and the inhabitants and, when reproduced and consumed by the readers, strengthens the visions that it creates.

About thirty years after Malraux’s failed expedition in French colonial Indochina, when the United States had launched its military intervention in Vietnam, Americans also created similar visions of Vietnam as a diseased land, which, I would argue, is an aspect of the American imaginative geography of Vietnam—that is, the images of chaos and insanitation, uncivilized wilderness infested with dangerous pathogens and inhabited by disease-carrying natives. As Francis Fitzgerald points out, American policy makers, military officers and GIs often described the Vietnamese terrains, North Vietnamese army and the NLF guerrillas in terms closely associated with diseases and disease carriers. For instances, General Westmoreland called the NLF troops “termites,” and

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<sup>74</sup> Malraux 67, 83, 104, 121, and *passim*.

according to the then military officials' rhetoric, the Vietcong did not inhabit spaces, but instead they "infested areas."<sup>75</sup> American troops, therefore, have to implement "sweep and clear operations" or move refuge villagers into refugee camps in order that Americans "sanitize the area" (368). Importantly, as Fitzgerald further discusses, those derogatory representations are closely related with America's desire to place Vietnam in its mythological perspective, and to interpret the current conflict as another Indian War. Both ways of representing Vietnam reduce the complexities of the war into a simplistic, crude interpretation of battle between the civilized and the uncivilized. Having associated the Vietnamese land and the people with abominable tropical diseases and pathogens, US policy makers and military officers desired to understand the Vietnam War as an update of their mythic past: "an achievement in the name of humanity—the triumph of light over darkness, of good over evil, and of civilization over brutish nature" (368).

The visions of Vietnam as a diseased land in Malraux's novel brings us to Stephen Wright's novel *Meditations in Green* (1983), which attempts to formulate an incisive critique of American neo-colonialism by drawing the psychology underlying Americans' desire to represent Vietnam as a chaotic, insanitary, diseased land. Placing herbicide researcher James I. Griffin's Vietnam and post-war American experience as a focal point around which several characters' episodes rotate, Wright's novel stands

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<sup>75</sup> Francis Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2002) 368.

unique among a myriad of Vietnam War fictions, for it deals with the destruction, or “sanitisation” of the Vietnamese natural world brought about by US environmental warfare such as Agent Orange and napalm bombing, and makes it a compelling exegesis of the representation of the other. Although the control and destruction of the environment in war is neither a modern nor particularly American phenomenon, and American environmental warfare was conducted to some extent for strategic reasons, *Meditations in Green* asserts that the idea of controlling or “sanitising” the Vietnamese natural world is deeply rooted in the racist attitudes and the colonial mentalities on Americans’ part. Informed by Said’s and Sartre’s criticism of colonial discourse as well as Susan Sontag’s reflection on disease as metaphor, in this chapter I will suggest that the Vietnam-vet writer tries to undermine the legitimacy of the discourse of Vietnam as diseased, by interrogating/destabilising the binary opposition of the technologically advanced American order and the backward, insanitary Vietnamese chaos. Depicting the follies of haughty, bureaucratic officers who are the caricatures of American mythic heroes, the racial tension and the rampant drug abuse in the American troops, Wright attempts to expose the disorder that exists within the seemingly organized US military base as well as the fissures in the sleek surface of the official account of the war. Wright then represents the fallacies of U.S. military intervention, by describing the ways in

which US strategies are undermined by the resilient NLF forces, who, despite the mass destruction caused by US military machines, reappear time and again and unflinchingly keep waging guerrilla warfare against the American troops, and the overwhelmingly fertile Vietnamese natural world such as the heat, humidity, sand, and rain, which, for all the military authorities' efforts to clear or "discipline" the land, relentlessly encroach the military base and keep tormenting the GIs. Eventually, Wright suggests that U.S. military efforts to "sanitize" or "medicate" the diseased Vietnamese land are nothing but the illness that Americans themselves have brought to the land and the people of Vietnam, by figuring the military machines as monstrous insects; thereby the writer subverts the conventional images of Vietnam as diseased.

### **The Images of Vietnam as Diseased in *Meditations in Green***

Wright's criticism of the visions of Vietnam as a diseased land appears in an early part of *Meditations in Green* when, before he is sent to Vietnam, Griffin attends a lecture on US official history of the war as a part of his military training in Kentucky. What is worth noting in this scene besides the overtly masculine language and the haughty manners of the senior officers is the lecturer's use of pathological terms in figuring the enemy and their homeland. A seasoned captain, the lecturer, emphasizes the importance of preventing the communist force from taking over the Southeast Asian terrain by comparing the NLF troops in Vietnam to a venereal disease wrecking a male's genital:

“Gentlemen, a map of Southeast Asia. This stab of land (Tap) hanging like a cock off the belly of China is the Indochinese peninsula. ... Today, this tiny nation suffers from a bad case of VD, or if you will, VC. (Smiles wanly.) What we are witnessing, of course is a flagrant attempt to overthrow, by means of armed aggression, the democratic regime in Saigon. ... Consider the human body. What happens if an infection is allowed to go untreated? The bacteria spread, feeding on healthy tissue, until finally the individual dies. Physicians are bound by a moral oath which forbids them to ignore the presence of disease. ... A sore on the skin of even a single democracy threatens the health of all.”<sup>76</sup>

At one level, the medical metaphor—the necessity of preventing the disease from spreading throughout—may well reflect the tenet of containment policy: the US doctrine in the Cold War era to block the fall of “dominoes,” Soviet-led communists’ progress across Asia; the diplomatic scheme that failed fully to understand the internal dynamics of the Vietnamese struggles for independence and thus elevated “what might have remained a local conflict with primarily local implications” into “a major international conflict with enormous human costs that are still being paid.”<sup>77</sup> Stirring the fear of ever spreading communist influence over the “democratic” world, in which the United States established its supremacy, the captain asserts that the “sore on the skin of even a single democracy threatens the health of all,” so he exhorts the GIs to intervene, to “pum[p] in the penicillin” (10).

More importantly, the captain’s use of the analogy between venereal disease and

<sup>76</sup> Stephen Wright, *Meditations in Green* (New York: Vintage, 2003) 9–10.

<sup>77</sup> George C. Herring, *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2002) 357–58.



the Vietnamese guerrilla force can be understood as a caricature of the vision of diseased land that US military officials have imposed upon Vietnam, such as Westmoreland's remark cited earlier. By projecting the lecturer as an avatar of the US military, who figures the NLF force as a disease spreading through an otherwise wholesome human body, who, in turn, represents the US military as a physician prescribing necessary medication, Wright attempts to illustrate the process in which US military actions, for all the destruction they bring about, are legalized by the false association made by the likes of Westmoreland.

Sontag's idea of a "punitive notion of disease" is useful in unpacking this scene. Sontag argues that "the subjects of the deepest dread"—"corruption, decay, pollution, anomie, weakness"—are often associated with disease, so illness has long been regarded not only as a mere physical symptom, but also as a malevolent existence loaded with the "feeling about evil." Therefore, when, in turn, something else is figured in terms of an Illness, it bears the negative connotations that are related to the illness. Moreover, patients of a certain disease themselves are identified with the psychological fear that the disease evokes and are unduly regarded as responsible for their own sufferings.<sup>78</sup> Thus, when Vietnam and its people are represented both as a patient and the pathogens, they too are identified with the feeling of abjection that the disease is associated with and are

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<sup>78</sup> Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (London: Penguin, 2002) 59–60, and passim.

turned into culprits who deserve the punishment, or the treatment that US military force prescribes. In a later part of the novel, Wright depicts a scene in which an officer warns the GIs of the danger of catching venereal disease by promiscuous sexual intercourse with local prostitutes, by describing the pathogen as hideous monster-like bug: “the First Sergeant visualized the venereal enemy for them as a thousand-legged, hairy-bodied, sewer-colored bug with honed pincers and razor teeth that loved but nothing better than dining out on nerve ends and soft tasty brain matter” (303). In this scene the First Sergeant does not directly relate the disease to the Vietnamese communist force. However, when examined together with the lecture scene quoted earlier, one can argue that it vividly speaks of the images of evilness and degradation that the American military authorities attempt to impose upon the Vietnamese enemy.

Although those malignant visions of Vietnam are mere jargon that military authorities speak to their subordinates half jokingly, Wright suggests that they, nevertheless, are imprinted in each GI’s mind and constitute his own view of Vietnam. Fujii argues that Wright describes the 1069<sup>th</sup> Intelligent Group’s base in Vietnam, where Griffin serves, as a “huge discursive space” in which “a number of clichés typical of military life” circulate and also penetrate each one of GIs and their psyche, so those anonymous clichés, “marked by the logic of war and masculinity,” “constitut[e] the

utterers' identity as soldiers.”<sup>79</sup> In other words, Wright depicts the process in which the visions of, or clichés about, Asia that have been expressed by numerous preceding authors, officers, and others are handed down to the GIs fighting in Vietnam and eventually become the “reality” about Vietnam for the soldiers.

Indeed, Wright indicates that, after several months in Vietnam, the overtly sexist and racist discourse manifest in the captain's lecture has already permeated the GIs' minds as well. The captain slanders the NLF force by figuratively associating them with the feeling of the abject that venereal disease evokes. On the other hand, he also implies the possibility of promiscuous sexual intercourse that is often associated with the infection, and prompts the fresh recruits to expect erotic adventures with oriental women that they may well encounter in Vietnam, whereby they might catch a VD as a trophy of their exploit. The recruits' reaction to the captain's coarse joke is still hesitant and filled with the anxiety for the danger they may face in the remote terrain—most probably the captain only succeeded in drawing nervous, tentative giggles from them, hence his “wan” smile. After several months of their service in Vietnam, however, the GIs speak in the same sexist/racist manner of the senior officers. The very first scene of Griffin's Vietnam experience opens with the sudden, fitful flashes of electric bulbs in a still dark room that

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<sup>79</sup> Hikaru Fujii, “A Man With a Green Memory: War, Cinema, and Freedom in Stephen Wright's *Meditations in Green*,” *Arizona Quarterly* Vol. 65, No. 2 (Summer 2009): 117–35. 119.

forcibly awake the protagonist. For a moment, in a semiconscious state of waking he mistakes them for the enemy's motor rounds attacking the US base to kill him, and then he thinks that "he d[oes]n't ever want to die in a place where in the corner two drunks argu[e] in loud whisper over the juiciest way to fuck a gook pussy" (3).

Although Griffin is disgusted by his comrades' nasty remarks, he himself is not immune to the force of clichés that circulates in the military base either. To his chagrin, Griffin feels as if his former self before the war, "Real Griffin," has completely been obliterated and replaced by a callous, heartless psychopath whom he does not know (170). So when he recalls his schooldays vacations spent near the limpidity of Walden-like forest lake, "where the fish leaped like silver birds and agile water bugs skimmed the water surface," that seems to symbolize the innocence of his childhood, he feels as if it was "a million years ago" (175). Moreover, of all the residue of innocence he may still possess, he is not sure "how much remained to be shredded" (175). In this way, Wright also describes the ways in which the logic of the war, including the visions of the enemy that it creates, is pervasively internalized and reproduced by the GIs. No matter how strongly one detests it, the war's discursive space entraps him and completely eliminates his individuality, hence Griffin's lament: "The war [i]s real; he [i]s not" (193).

### **Wright's Metaphorical Narrative Device**

As I have argued above, in *Meditations in Green* the US military officials attempt to

define their actions in the Vietnamese terrains as a necessary medication for the foreign diseased land infested with the germ/disease-carrier-like enemy. Wright also illustrates the lasting effect of the military discourse—the racist/sexist mentality that underlies these visions has been handed down to and reproduced by each GI. Placed in a remote, unfamiliar landscape, and being unable to understand the local language spoken by the native villagers, the GIs adopt the closest measure at hand to define the invisible enemy who supposedly ambush them in the surrounding tropical forest, thereby protecting their own sense of identity at stake in the hostile foreign terrain. In this section, I will further investigate Wright’s critique of the US intervention in Vietnam, by focusing upon how American representation of Vietnam as a diseased land—a colonialist/racist illusion exemplified by the captain’s lecture on “sanitising” or “medicating” Vietnam—is subverted by the Vietnam veteran writer’s deliberate use of metaphoric imagery.

As several critics have argued, along with William Eastlake’s *The Bamboo Bed* (1969), Michael Herr’s *Dispatches* (1977), and Tim O’Brien’s *Going After Cacciato* (1978), and *Meditations in Green* places itself in the forefront of non-realistic, experimental Vietnam War narratives, whose counterparts in the Second World War fictions are Heller’s *Catch 22* (1961), and Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse 5* (1969), among others, but certainly not Mailer’s *The Naked and the Dead* (1948). As one of the first

critics who examined Wright's narrative styles, Mathew Stewart argues that Wright's Vietnam novel "transcends the type of war narrative that adheres to a more confined style of conventional realism," and "succeeds in depicting Vietnam's wastage both in a literal, descriptive level typical of traditional realism and a non-mimetic level that links the novel to more experimental fictions."<sup>80</sup> By non-mimetic level, Stewart means the passages and techniques "whose significance [is] found primarily at a metaphorical and intratextual level ..." (126). As a case in point, I will closely look at the following episode that appears in a middle part of the novel, in which one of the central character's actions metaphorically/intratextually relate to the captain's lecture cited earlier. These two apparently separate episodes, when combined together, makes even more cogent the author's criticism of American discourse of Vietnam as diseased, inferior, and feminine.

When Kraft, a member of Special Forces stationed in the 1069<sup>th</sup> Intelligence Group Compound, embarks upon a mission to interrogate a small Vietnamese village suspected of hostile activities, he and the members of the mission have to, first of all, find out the village that seems to be hidden in the heart of the enemy's jungle territory. Besides the extremely severe climate and the fear of the skulking guerrillas, the GIs have to fight against the thick tropical vegetation that hinders their progress, and that blocks

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<sup>80</sup> Mathew Stewart, "Stephen Wright's Style in *Meditations in Green*, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* Vol. 34, No. 2 (Winter 1993): 126–36. 126.

their views and deprives Americans of the sense of orientation. Kraft and his crew thus undergo the danger of losing their way in the midst of the alien landscape, and the sense of dread that the GIs experience is described in the very first scene of this episode as follows: “The trees stood straight up thick as phalluses and cautiously they picked their way like blind explorers” (76). It should be noted that, in this series of events, Wright, reutilising the image of genitalia that the captain used in the lecture episode, delineates the way in which the soldiers’ psychology is projected upon the surrounding landscape. Because their eyesight is hindered by the dense tropical foliage, the soldiers have to stumble across the land as if blinded; and because they are confronted with the terror of the enemy’s ambush as well as the possibility of becoming lost in the malevolent wilderness, the GIs feel as if they are enfeebled, miniaturized, and feminized, so the surrounding tropical forest looks menacing like tall “phalluses” that may at any moment assault them. In fact, Herschel, one of the GIs is killed by the enemy’s surprise fire during the march that almost seems to come out from the jungle itself. The Vietnamese rainforest, which Kraft perceives as “the green hostility,” combined with the terror of the invisible guerrillas, appears as sinisterly invincible to the GIs (76). The soldiers return the enemy’s fire, but the “continuous racket and outpouring of metal [are] absorbed without reaction by Bush” (78).

However, when the GIs finally find the village and begin their interrogation, the sense of dread, impotence and frustration that has exasperated them is replaced by another, aggressive emotion. Empowered by the superior weapons that they possess and the fact that the villagers are only “[b]abies and moms and senile grandparents,” the Americans now direct their untrammelled anger toward the villagers, as if, in so doing, they carry out the revenge for the demised comrade and retaliate for the humiliation that has been inflicted upon them. Kraft, an experienced assassin, detaches himself from the young GIs and disgustedly sees them abuse the people and destroy the village “in a grim fever” (79). Importantly, in this scene of the GIs’ brutal violence against the Vietnamese villagers, in striking contrast to the jungle scene, where the hostile environment and the invisible enemy emasculate the American soldiers, the GIs assume the masculine aggressor role, and in turn attempt to feminize the Vietnamese villagers. The young Americans speak and behave in overtly militant, brutal manners, and demonstrate the likes of the racist/sexist attitudes that the captain implicitly inculcated into the recruits in his lecture—some laughing soldiers are “pissing into a rice jar,” and a blond corporal grumbles, “these bitches is too ugly to rape” (79). The following scene, in which two old Vietnamese men are captivated by the GIs, is another telling example of Wright’s unique narrative strategies in that the metaphorical images appearing therein intratextually relate



to the preceding “phallic” jungle scene, and thus intensifies further Wright’s dark portrayal of America’s excessive violence in Vietnam. At one point, Kraft is asked by Captain Brack, the leader of the mission, to interpret the interrogation of two old Vietnamese men who attempted to escape. Then, the old men and the GIs huddling around them are described as follows: “Captain Brack pointed out to a pair of old men squatting on splayed feet *amid a restless green forest of American legs*” (81, emphasis added). Contrary to the previous jungle scene, this time the GIs’ khaki clad legs have become menacingly tall/phallic trees. Overwhelming the villagers by their firearms, the Americans confiscate from the old Vietnamese men the sense of masculine dignity as a patriarch, by forcing them to “sprawl” like insects that timidly creep across the land underneath the hostile American trees. The scene of the GIs’ killing the old men is a disturbing finishing touch that Wright adds to the already dreadful episode. The GIs murder the victims by detonating explosives attached to them. Narrating the incident from the perspectives of the GIs involved in the murder, the narrator describes the two killed men as “Gookhoppers”—an indication that the American characters regard the Vietnamese people as weak, inferior, sinful, and disgusting as insect-pests that deserve extermination/punishment (84).

In this way, by employing the intricate metaphorical/intratextual images, Wright

describes the psychological process in which one's feelings and emotions—in particular those related to the loss and the possession of power—affects his or her perception of environs. As examined above, the GIs' perception of the land and the people of Vietnam drastically changes as they go through the perilous journey and the interrogation of the village. Dispossessed of their stamina and sense of orientation, the GI are initially frightened by the alien aspects of the Vietnamese rainforest, feeling as if they are “blind explorers” almost as helpless as those insects creeping through the “Phallic” jungle trees.

When they siege the village and ensure their safety, using their firearms, however, their strong sense of dread and anxiety disappear, and are instead replaced by the feelings of omnipotence and uncontrollable anger directed at the unarmed villagers. This time, the GIs feel as if they themselves have become the menacing, phallic “green forest,” and in turn regard the villagers as pestilential insects. With this, Wright suggests that, rather than being a valid, dialectic exegesis of the land and the people, the representations of the Vietnamese land and the people as diseased, animalistic, and vermin-like are essentially an *ex parte* discourse that has been fabricated and preserved by the successive generations of colonialists who aspire to keep Vietnam under their supreme control. It should also be pointed out that in the same scene Wright indicates that the GIs carry “grim fever” when interrogating/intimidating the Vietnamese villagers—that is,

contrary to American military authorities' claim that the United States aims to medicate disease-infested Vietnam, Wright implies that no other than Americans themselves are the carrier of detrimental diseases that endanger the Vietnamese people's lives and the natural environment of their homeland.

The novel's metaphorical language invites a further intricate interpretation of the text. In particular, it brings us to Wright's attempts to place the Vietnam War in a larger context of American colonial history. After examining the GIs' outburst of violence in Kraft's jungle mission that inevitably evokes the calamity of My Lai Massacre, the "blind explorers," the metaphor that Wright uses to describe the feeling of uncertainty and fear that the GIs suffer in the hostile jungle, starts to assume even greater significance. Wright's use of the word "explorers" to designate the GIs in the Indochinese rainforest suggests the writer's attempt to relate American intervention in Vietnam to the early American colonial experience, in which European explorers journeyed across the alien landscape of the New World. For one thing, the "blind"ness of the explorers indicates the physical handicap that Americans have to endure in the cumbersome dense tropical vegetation and the Europeans in the wilderness of the hitherto unknown land. For another, however more importantly, it metaphorically signifies the spiritual blindness of both the European colonists in the New World and the

contemporary Americans in Vietnam that eventually led them to the mass destruction of the indigenous people and their culture.<sup>81</sup> Although both the early settlers and contemporary Americans claimed to have come from the enlightened country to bring order—the higher ethical standards of the “authentic” religion and the wisdom of advanced civilisation—to the dark, backward lands and the pagan savages, it turned out that both of them were “blind” to the local language, the culture and the history of the indigenous peoples, and, therefore, became callous to their opponents’ causes for resistance. In this way, by paralleling the two catastrophic events that took place in the different times and spaces, Wright suggests that the Vietnam War is by no means a deviation from the logic of America’s national history, but instead a contemporary manifestation of America’s colonialist violence that has existed in US culture from its very beginning.

### **The Plant Imagery**

Among all the narrative techniques that Wright uses, most scholars agree that the plant imagery plays a central role in conveying the significance of the impact that Vietnam

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<sup>81</sup> Researchers have demonstrated that the encounters between the European explorers/immigrants and the Native Americans were more complex than merely fitting to the conventional tales of the conquest and the exploitations of the natives, and the relationship between the two camps was multifaceted. However, that does not set off the undeniable historical facts of the great loss that the indigenes were forced to suffer. See James Axtell, *Beyond 1492: Encounters in Colonial North America* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992). Karen Ordahl Kupperman illustrates the Anglo-Indian interaction in the early colonial period. See her *Settling With the Indians: The Meeting of English and Indian Cultures in America, 1580-1640* (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1980).

War has exerted upon US society.<sup>82</sup> As Ringnalda contends, “green,” the hue of plants, is the colour that symbolizes the Vietnam War experience. It is the colour of “the cosmic Southeast Asian jungle, the unmapped life-giving and life-taking jungle”; and for many veterans, “the word ‘Vietnam’ is virtually synonym with the jungle and the colour green—a green Vietnam that was at once sublimely beautiful and terrifyingly menacing.”<sup>83</sup> Just like the tropical green rainforest overflowing in the Vietnamese terrain, the plant imagery or metaphor, which Wright himself considers as an element “bind[ing] the whole things together” indeed abounds in the novel.<sup>84</sup> For instance, the fifteen short episodes or poems named “Meditation in Green” inserted in-between the protagonist’s Vietnam and post-war narratives are all related to plants, cocaine—the drug derived from coca shrubs, which was commonly abused among the GIs in Vietnam—and the environmental destruction brought about by the US military actions in Vietnam.

Although they do not have any ostensible connections with the novel’s main plot, the short interludes can be interpreted as the visions that Griffin himself has created throughout the series of “vegetable consciousness” sessions that he undergoes seven

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<sup>82</sup> Stewart 127. Pilar Marín, “Entropy in Meditations in Green,” *Atlantis* Vol. 11. No. 1/2 (1989): 137–47. 138. Donald Ringnalda, *Fighting and Writing the Vietnam War* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994) 51, and passim.

<sup>83</sup> Ringnalda 50–51.

<sup>84</sup> Patrick Ambrose, “Stephen Wright’s Literary Landscape,” *The Morning News* 7 June 2006, 20 May 2011  
<[http://www.themorningnews.org/archives/interviews/stephen\\_wrights\\_literary\\_landscape.php](http://www.themorningnews.org/archives/interviews/stephen_wrights_literary_landscape.php)>.

years after the end of his service in Vietnam to get over the flashbacks of terrible war events under the guidance of Arden, himself a Vietnam veteran, the guru of the New Age “green” therapy (86). Despite the fact that Arden’s name refers to Shakespeare’s pastoral forest in *As You Like It*, his therapy offers no relief to Griffin.<sup>85</sup> Since the colour green and the plants are a constant reminder of the war, and also because of the protagonist’s increasing reliance on cocaine, the “transplant” meditations, in which a patient identifies himself with a “personal follower” chosen in accordance with his own desired traits brings about even severer attacks of PTSD instead of “inspir[ing] a sympathetic efflorescence of the soul” and giving him any moments of tranquillity (86). For instance, the picture of bucolic flower garden that Arden recommends Griffin to concentrate upon abruptly turns into a diabolic scene of massacre by transforming the flowers into the open bodies of the war dead: “Orchids dangling from every ear like splayed skin, pretty nut brown heads beginning to rupture” (141).

In this way, the plant imagery in part serves to relate the protagonist’s Vietnam experience to his predicament in the post-war United States. In other words, in *Mediations in Green*, it functions as a vehicle to convey the lasting effect that the Vietnam War has had upon individuals. Metaphorically identifying the fertile Vietnamese jungle that American machines could never completely eliminate with

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<sup>85</sup> Ringnalda 52.

Griffin's indelible traumatic memories of the war, Wright depicts the plight of a Vietnam veteran who cannot reconcile himself with his experiences in the war. The memories of the war dead are reincarnated as green ghosts and they start to infiltrate into Griffin's flat just like Vietnamese plants overflowing into the US army base: "Things grow whether I want or not. [...] . Motley faces gloating off the walls, broad green fingers reaching out" (180–81). Although seven years have already elapsed since Griffin completed his service, he is still being haunted by the war. Therefore, Arden's exhortation—"Let us have done with the season of death and black thoughts and brown funks. Spring approaches. Green is the color of the future. Think green!"—does not usher in the spring, the season of rebirth and redemption, but instead seems to pronounce on Griffin an eternal curse of Vietnam, which he will never be able to get rid of. If green is the colour of not only Vietnam but also the coming future in the United States, Griffin will forever be entrapped in the trauma of the war. By means of his botanical imagery, Wright thus tries to delineate the great impact that the war has exerted upon individuals involved in the war. The painful experiences of Vietnam—including the destruction of the Vietnamese land—completely disassociate Griffin and other Vietnam-vets the blessing of nature that writers such as Emerson and Thoreau have once celebrated. The "occult relation between men and the vegetable" that Emerson once praised as a reminder of humans'

relation to divine spirit that Nature confers on mortals is no longer a heavenly gift, but instead is transformed into a curse that binds Americans to the trauma of the war.<sup>86</sup>

Having examined the significant role in connecting the two different sets of narratives—the war and the post-war—that the plant imagery plays in *Meditations in Green*, I will now turn to another important aspect of the botanical images. I would contend that Wright uses the metaphor of plants in order to subvert the vision of diseased land that Vietnam has long been identified with, which we have already found in Malraux's novel set in French colonial Indochina, and which Wright himself caricatured in the captain's lecture scene. A closer reading of Arden's green therapy scene cited earlier will enable us to examine Wright's attempts to challenge the legacy of colonialists' imaginative geography of Southeast Asia.

When Griffin visits Arden's office and attends the therapist's lecture, his attention drifts off from the talk to the strange patterns that are printed across Arden's green robe. These hundreds of mystic small circles are "the emblem of uroboros, the serpent devouring its tail" (90). They are meant to be the "image of renewal, immortality, eternity," or "the chemical symbol of oxygen, final product of photosynthesis"—an element of nature which is vital for sustaining the life of almost all the living forms on

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<sup>86</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature. Emerson's Complete Works Volume 1* (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1913) 16.



earth. They, nevertheless, remind Griffin of the destruction that the US has brought upon the Vietnamese land: “Whenever I sat in this office, staring at that costume, waiting for a monologue to end, I couldn’t help but think that all those circles scattered *like leper’s sores* over all that green had the depressed look of craters, mandala of the bomb” (90, emphasis added). It is worth noting that here Griffin figures the damage caused by US bombing in terms of illness, “leper’s sore.” That is, contrary to the army officials’ assertion that US military actions are compulsory/necessary medication for Vietnam infested with germ-like communist force, Wright describes American intervention and its destructive consequences as the disease that the United States has brought to Vietnam. In this way, Wright subverts the discourse that pathologizes Indochina. Wright’s text implies that, in much the same way as the alien germs that European colonialists and their livestock brought to the New World devastated the lives of the indigenous people and the ecology of their homeland, the napalms, chemical defoliants and so forth—the pathogens that the US military had transported to Vietnam—severely destructed the fauna and flora of the Indochinese peninsula.

Utilising his green metaphor throughout the novel, Wright thus repeatedly re-enacts the scenes in which Americans find themselves turned into the germs or pathogens that inflict the bodies of Vietnamese and their own and alike, thereby

attempting to undermine the false association between disease and Vietnam that Americans have created. For instance, one of the protagonist's comrades describes the Vietnamese landscape destroyed by American air-raid and environmental warfare as a land suffering "vegetable cancer," and Griffin—a damage interpreter and a herbicide researcher—realizes that this illness inflicting the enemy's homeland is a foreign plague that no other than Americans themselves have brought to Vietnam (132). The protagonist thus sees a macabre vision in which the Vietnamese land is dying of the fatal American disease: "He'd seen the land develop acne, now he'd watch it lose its hair. Sooner or later, [...] they [US commanding officers]'d have him on his hands and knees, polishing the skull, measuring the brain pan with a pair of steel callipers" (132–33). Having examined Wright's use of green imagery in his attempts to overthrow the conventional representation of Vietnam, I will now look at Wright's larger narrative scheme closely related to the botanical metaphor—the binary oppositional images of the United States and Vietnam—in which the author further develops his critique of American colonial mind-set. I would argue that, in constructing this peculiar narrative strategy, Wright works upon the traditional theme of American literature that generations of American writers have explored: the clash between Nature and Machine.

**American Machine and the Vietnamese Natural World: The Opposite Images in *Meditations in Green***

As Matthew Stewart points out, Wright's metaphorical use of language "is marked by a number of different oppositions that sporadically contend against each other: urban versus rural, form and design versus formlessness and chaos."<sup>87</sup> Although Stewart only briefly relates this finding to Wright's botanical metaphor, when re-examining Stewart's discussion especially in relation to the novel's central narrative device, one can argue that the "opposites" recurring in the novel are in fact the opposition created between the overwhelmingly fertile Vietnamese natural world and the US military base which tries to subdue the hostile forces of the jungle and the enemy guerrillas who take cover therein. Just as the dense Cambodian tropical rainforest in *La Voie Royale* is seen by the European explorers as filthy "shapeless jungle," the Vietnamese jungle terrain that expands beyond the perimeter of the 1069<sup>th</sup> Intelligence Group compound in *Meditations in Green* is also perceived by the GI characters as formless world of chaos that threatens their physique and sense of identity as American males.

When Claypool, a meek fresh recruit for the 1069<sup>th</sup> intelligence Group, is ordered to accompany a patrol to a hostile jungle territory as an interpreter, the menacing forces of Southeast Asian terrain confront him. When the patrol enters the jungle, Claypool is immediately disturbed by the extremely harsh conditions of the rainforest that enfeebles

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<sup>87</sup> Stewart 132.

him: "It [is] like being locked in a sick room with a vaporizer jammed on high. A cloud of tiny bugs swar[m] about his face, fl[y] in and out his mouth. He spit[s] out some, swallow[s] the rest" (153). Significantly, the rainforest is seen by Claypool as an insanitary "sickroom," a phrase that resonates with the US military's conventional representation of Vietnam as a diseased land, which reflects the soldiers' fear of contamination by the dangerous pests and germs skulking in the jungle. What the GI experiences here is a sense of claustrophobia for the adverse elements of the jungle that constantly reaches in. The bugs, the heat, and the humidity keep invading the perimeter of the soldier's body and attempt to threaten his sense of identity. Just before the patrol is attacked by the enemy's ambush, Claypool is terrified by the idea of getting forever lost in this rainforest, seeing a horrible vision of the GIs "finally eaten by the plants" (158). In this way, Wright describes the Vietnamese rainforest outside the perimeter of US base as a sickened "organic inferno" that penetrates the contours of the soldiers' body with its pestilential miasma, bugs, and the animal-like tentacles of the botany (157).

Further to this point, the Vietnamese terrain outside the perimeter is perceived by the GIs to be an amorphous, formless world. It sometimes appears as a seemingly peaceful bucolic landscape: "A buffalo ambled through the water, a small boy clutching a stick perched on its dark back. Turquoise sky, silky clouds. A travel poster. An

Occidental romance”(153). Or at other time it looks like sublime wilderness: when the GIs take a short break during their long march, Claypool is transported by the serenity of “the deep green canopy” (153). Nevertheless, it can anytime be changed into a hellish scene of deadly battle by the enemy who are indistinguishable from the native villagers, and who might be hiding behind the scene, silently aiming their arms at the GIs’ toiling procession. Wright acutely depicts the terror and the confusion that the GIs undergo in the enemy’s ambush wherein the surrounding landscape suddenly transforms into a literal hell. Wright highlights the abruptness of this change; he makes the transition of the scenes from the march to the battle without changing the paragraph, and by depicting the scene through the confused eyes of Claypool: “Flash. Boom. Wha happened? ‘I cannot see,’ someone [is] crying, ‘I can’t fucking SEE!’ Claypool shut[s] his eyes and squeeze[s] his asshole as tight as he could. Here it [is]. The Big Scene. Yells. Screams” (158). Because of this utter unpredictability of the Vietnamese terrain, during the march Claypool has always felt that “everything loo[k] sinister and alive” (154). In the eyes of American infantrymen, therefore, the Vietnamese terrain appears to be an amorphous world of chaos—the “organic inferno”—that may all at once transform its contours. Wright repeats the images of Vietnam as a formless, chaotic space throughout the novel. Griffin is also apprehensive of the unpredictable danger that the Vietnamese landscape

may at anytime bring upon him. Looking down upon the field from the helicopter one day, the protagonist thinks of the Vietnamese landscape as follows: “It all seemed pretty routine to him, farms, roads, trees, hootches, the same routine in fact that was forever erupting into violent surprise. *Idyllic valley one moment, howling badlands the next*” (253, emphasis added).

It should also be noted that the NLF and NVA [North Vietnamese Army] forces, who hide under the cover of dense jungle vegetation, are often perceived by the GIs not as humans but as insect pests. When Griffin accompanies his comrade lieutenant Mueller’s air raid operation, seated in the cockpit, he overhears the radio communication between the pilots in the same mission. The correspondence is carried out in a manner that Griffin describes as “cool professional voices” in which esoteric, militant jargons penetrated by the logic of the war are exchanged (213). Then Griffin hears one of the pilots speak of the targeted village suspected of hostile activities in terms closely related to insect pests: “The province chief says that *the whole village is lousy with VC* so knock your self out” (213, emphasis added). The pilot’s remark about the native village “lousy” with NLF guerrillas is strikingly analogous to the US military officials’ comment about Vietcong soldiers “infesting” the land that Fitzgerald discusses earlier. Later, as if the pilots’ military language has been internalized by Griffin, the protagonist finds himself

also describing the Vietnamese enemy as vermin crawling across the landscape. In his flight excursion to Saigon granted by his superior, Griffin has to fight the enemy troop in the field who have ground-fired his helicopter and killed the door gunner. In the midst of the firefight, he hears himself utter a curse—“Waste those motherfuckers, oh goddamn”—and begins to swing the machinegun, firing at the enemy soldiers in the rice paddy field below. Wright describes the NLF soldiers seen from Griffin’s viewpoint as follows: “the paddies, the huts, *the bugs on the ground, the bugs everywhere*, shaking and shaking, his own parts coming loose” (255, emphasis added). In this way, Wright suggests that the images of the shapeless jungle and the visions of insect-like Vietnamese are closely related in the GIs’ mind-set: while the GIs see the alien Vietnamese terrains as hostile, chaotic jungle, they regard the Vietnamese enemy as insect-pests inhabiting it.

In manners that oppose the images of the formless Vietnamese natural world, Wright constructs the images of US military base in Vietnam. Looking at the inside of the perimeter of the 1069<sup>th</sup> Intelligence Group compound, it is immediately apparent that the geometrically ordered design of the base forms a striking contrast with the organic, shapeless chaos of the Vietnamese rainforest:

From the air the compound of the 1069<sup>th</sup> Intelligence Group was a triumph of military design. Living quarters for both officers and enlisted men consisted of fifty-five identical hootches arranged in five ranks of eight hootches, then three ranks of five. ... But the unit’s basic geometric design possessed a pleasing sense of natural logic and finality that seemed somehow magical to the mind (40).

In fact, the images of straight lines, right angles, and the word “geometry” repeatedly appear throughout the Vietnam part of the story, and function to emphasize the order of the technologically engineered world of control that the US military has created in the middle of the uncivilized foreign land, even though that control is partial and, as I will discuss later, perhaps illusory. When Griffin appears in the Vietnam part of the novel for the first time, as already examined earlier, he is awakened by the sudden, fitful flashes of the electric bulbs that remind him of the enemy’s attack. What we also notice in this scene is the images of straight lines, angles, and the neatly designed order of the 1069<sup>th</sup> Intelligence Group: “Someone flipped a switch and darkness exploded into geometry. Spheres of light overhead illuminated the angles and planes of an enormous rectangular room. Two rows of bunks faced one another in mirrored perfection” (11). In contrast to the utter unpredictability of the Vietnamese terrain which may anytime turn “idyllic valley” into “howling badlands,” the inside of the perimeter of 1069<sup>th</sup> Intelligence Group compound at first glance appears in the eyes of the GIs as a world of control and order.

In this way, Wright creates the two oppositional images that are respectively associated with Vietnam and the United States. Furthermore, Wright represents the battle between the two contending camps in terms of the collision between nature and machine. That is, whereas the NVA and NLF are associated with the forces of the recalcitrant



Vietnamese natural world, the US army is often related to the high-tech machines—vehicles, weapon, and so forth—that the GIs use to tame the fierce tropical jungle and its allies. Take the following scene for instance: “The rain f[alls] in hard straight lines and the shells fl[y] out, the planes mov[e] up and down, the helicopters [go] round and round. Outside, in the dark, metal and machinery [are] busy churning plants and animals into garbage” (21). It should be noted that this is where Wright describes the Vietnamese terrain for the first time in the novel. And here in the novel’s very first scene of the Vietnamese warzone, by creating a contrast between the swampy, mushy texture of the land and the metallic surfaces of the machines, the author implies that he represents the war as a conflict between the Vietnamese natural world and the war machines of the United States. Here the American machines are destroying the fauna and flora of Vietnam and transforming them into waste. Elsewhere in the novel Wright depicts scenes wherein US army’s whole organisation itself appears to be an enormous machine and individual GIs are seen as its mechanical parts. In describing the character of Wendell Payne—an eccentric member of the 1069<sup>th</sup> Intelligence Group, who is exempted from ordinary military duties and devotes himself to his own project of creating a great Vietnam War film—the narrator explains that Payne has attained his unusual sinecure by cunningly demonstrating his eccentricities and making his superiors believe that he is

a loose mechanical part that does not fit into the larger structure of the army: “To Captain DeLong, his section chief, Wendell [i]s just one of the loose wheels occasionally thrown off by *the Green Machine* as it lumber[s] through the soggy unmapped waste of this unfortunate war” (161, emphasis added). It should be noted that “Big Green Machine” was a slang widely used by GIs during the Vietnam War to refer to the US Army, since “virtually everything in the Army—uniform, vehicles, field gear, and personal equipment—was a shade of green,” and also because it reflected the soldiers’ perception that “the Army, like most bureaucracies, was impersonal and mechanical.”<sup>88</sup> Wright combines the term into his narrative, and constructs the novel’s binary structure in which the control and order that the US army attempts to impose against the Vietnamese is incarnated as a gigantic military machine.

At first glance, by formulating the metaphorical contrast between the Vietnamese forces and the US Army, Wright may seem to merely reproduce the conventional images of the chaotic, insanitary, diseased land and people of Vietnam and the technologically advanced America. However, I would argue that Wright recreates these images in order to challenge them by deliberately confusing the binary opposition and describes the ways in which the American controlled world of order is dismantled by the several forces

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<sup>88</sup> Jerold E. Brown, ed., *Historical Dictionary of the US Army* (West Port, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001) 59–60.

within and without the base. As stated above, the colour “green” appearing in the epithet—“Green Machine”—designates the green colour of the GIs’ outfit and so forth. However more importantly, as I will examine later, it also forebodes the eventual dissolution of the boundary between American world of order and the Vietnamese natural world, by implying in the oxymoronic combination of “green” and “machine” the defeat of the United States in which the American war machine is devoured/destroyed by the resilient green of Vietnam.

Moreover, as Leo Marx argues, the clash between machine and nature is a central metaphor that generations of American writers have worked on. The close examination of Wright’s attempts, therefore, will relate his Vietnam War novel to the critique of American civilization that the writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Jack London and so forth meditated upon from the mid-nineteenth century to the beginning of the last century, when US society was in the tumult of a drastic social transformation from physiocracy to industrial capitalism.<sup>89</sup> By examining the imagery of the collision between American war machines and the Vietnamese natural world that Wright creates in *Meditations in Green*, I would suggest that the literary critique of the concerns of the changing society—the denial of humanity in a highly mechanized

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<sup>89</sup> Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

organisation and the imposition of excessive control over nature—that the preceeding American writers expressed are relevant to the conditions of the United States during and post-Vietnam War era. Moreover, they are instrumental in understanding further the psychological drive and colonial mentality on Americans' part to describe Vietnam and Vietnamese people as diseased, insanitary, and inferior.

In order to unlock the scenes of the crash between the Big Green Machine and the forces of Vietnamese natural world that Wright describes, it is worth noting that throughout *Meditations in Green*, American soldiers and the war machines that wreak destruction upon Vietnam are—despite their technologically engineered, metallic outlook—often figured as some species of organism, and still more importantly they are sometimes seen as gigantic insects and animals. That is, Wright portrays them as the carrier of American diseases. For instance, when Griffin is invited by Lieutenant Mueller to join an air-raid mission, he looks at the lieutenant's face wearing aviator's convex silver lensed sunglasses and says, "You look like an insect" (211). During their attack upon a hostile terrain, Griffin hears over the radio one of the pilots designate the bombshells, which they drop over the land, as "eggs" (213). In the beginning of the episode, Griffin feels elated by the sensation and speed of the flight and thinks that they are heading toward, and will be fighting against the enemy in "Indian Country" (212).

Thus, he tries to see the US bomber pilots as the contemporary Western rangers fighting in the alien wilderness, and believes in the legitimacy of the discourse that represents US military intervention in Vietnam as America's evangelical missions to contain Communists in the Asian Third World. Nevertheless, the sinister images of Americans and their machines as pestilential vermin subvert the protagonist's romanticized vision and instead bring into sharp focus the destruction that the US military bring about upon the land and the people. Moreover, at the end of the episode, the images of ideal American masculine heroes that Griffin identifies himself with are again undermined by his blunder. Mueller's and Griffin's plane is attacked by enemy ground-fire; barely escaping from the crisis, it finally lands on the 1069<sup>th</sup> Compound. Then, descending from the craft, Griffin imagines himself to be like valiant explorers/heroes such as "Charles Lindberg and Errol Flynn" who have undergone a great adventure, and waves cheerfully at the assembled ground crew (218). However, the protagonist's theatrical display of masculine valour utterly fails, when the narrator tells that his greeting hand "h[olds] firmly ... a colourful bag of fresh vomit [which he throw up during the escape] triumphantly displayed as though it were a prize, an award just presented by the president of a grateful nation" (218).

Later, Lieutenant Mueller is killed in an accidental explosion of the US artillery in

the 1069<sup>th</sup> Compound, and shortly afterwards when Griffin, in his grief for his comrade's death, wanders around the base and looks at the US bomber fleet stationed in the hangar, again he sees the vision of American war machines transformed into enormous insects and their weapon into larvae: "Opposite the wide floodlit doors the planes, thick and snout-nosed ... resembl[e] obscene insects, pregnant dragonflies heavy with unborn larvae of some metallic monstrosity" (269). In this way throughout *Meditations in Green*, Wright replaces the images of splendour, triumph and manly courage that have long been reproduced in the popular myth of American warriors with those of abjection and farce. In so doing, Wright also attempts to undermine the false association with illness and the entailing notion of sin and inferiority that the United States has imposed upon Vietnam, by describing the scenes in which American high-technological war machines become the gigantic disease carriers that cause devastating disaster upon both Vietnamese and Americans.

It should also be noted that in the same scene Wright describes the negative, impersonal aspects of the Green Machine. Immediately after the scene quoted above, Griffin finds the bomber that Mueller has piloted, and presently he is dismayed to see that a new pilot has already substituted for Mueller by taking over his bomber, as if no such tragic incident has happened to the base. Griffin observes that "prompt replacement

of parts mechanical and human ha[s] become a priority mission” of the US military (271). Here, Wright creates a reenactment of the scene of the exploitation/alienation of individuals by highly industrialized/mechanized society that preceding American writers also attempted to delineate. Jack London, for instance, portrays the predicament of low-wage laborers in his short story “The Apostate” (1906) in the early part of the twentieth-century. London in particular described how the negative, inhuman aspects of “Taylorism”—a highly systematized way of management that aims to gain maximum profit from business, developed by engineer Frederick Winslow Taylor and adopted by numerous manufacturing factories during that time—had affected the psyche and the physique of individual workers.<sup>90</sup> Johnny, the teenage protagonist of London’s story, who works in a mill factory to support his family, suffers spiritual as well as material deprivation because of the cheap wages and poor labor conditions of the factory. Among the rows of machines, everyday he “work[s] mechanically,” because his work requires him just to automatically react to the movements of the machines without thinking

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<sup>90</sup> The “scientific management,” made viable by the development of modern mechanic technology, proposes breaking down “complex, skilled tasks into its component parts—simple moves that could be taught in a short time.” Though it succeeded in increasing the factories’ productivity and thus benefitted the employers, it also resulted in the disempowerment of laborers. Since Taylorization deprived laborers of the opportunities to learn skills, it resulted in “a greater numbers of unskilled workers, and a corresponding decrease in workers’ wages and power to decide on the conditions of their labor.” S.E. Tozer and et al, *School and Society: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2002) 90.

anything else.<sup>91</sup> As the simple, monotonous tasks of the factory do not train/educate the workers, they are not able to develop their skills, and so are always forced to work at extremely low wages. They are, in essence, treated as merely insignificant parts of the assembly-line system that can at anytime be dismissed and replaced with new parts/employee whenever the employers wish to do so. As it were, they are deprived of their humanity, and used as merely replaceable parts of the machines. Hence, Johnny's life lacks any joy and hope, and he "s[its] always in the one place, beyond the reach of daylight, a gas-jet flaring over him, himself part of the mechanism."<sup>92</sup> Likewise, the GIs in Vietnam that Wright describes are stripped of their individuality, and are degraded into mere replaceable parts of the massive military apparatus—the Green Machine. Moreover, by imagining the American high-tech military machines as gigantic insects and associating the image of monstrosity with them, the author attempts to fully visualize the relentlessly inhuman, brutal aspects of the Big Green Machine. By describing the inhuman aspects of the Army that treats individual GIs as its replaceable mechanical parts, Wright asserts that "the Army [is] an inexorable and uncaring juggernaut that exploit[s] whatever value people ha[ve], ground[s] them down, and l[eaves] nothing but

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<sup>91</sup> Jack London, "The Apostate," *The Complete Short Stories of Jack London Volume Two*, ed. Earle Labor and et al., (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993) 1112–1129. 1115.

<sup>92</sup> London 1120.



carnage in its wake.”<sup>93</sup> At the same time, the ontological boundary between the American controlled world and the chaotic Vietnamese jungle created by Americans starts to dissolve, since American high-tech military machines—the symbol of their superior civilisation—assume the semblance of insect that they despise.

Wright further develops his critique of the American’s idea of controlling/medicating “diseased” Vietnam, by describing the failures of US military efforts in the person of Major Holly, the commanding officer of the 1069<sup>th</sup> Intelligence Group. As if to embody the US Army’s efforts to establish the world of American order and control upon the foreign Vietnamese wilderness by means of its advanced military machines, Holly’s character is marked by his obsession with the ideas of imposing control and discipline upon the body and the land. For instance, Holly’s appearance is meticulously tended, clean, and neat in manners that are quite contrary to the GIs who ignore military discipline, and who—with their disheveled hair and tattered uniforms—almost look like hippies. Holly’s hair is not left growing like tropical wild plants but is cropped short like “putting green grass,” and his “[f]irm jaw” and “[c]left chin” are well-shaven and proudly exposed to the air. Likewise, his office is meticulously organized and appears to be impeccable. Wright described it as being “clean and spare,” because “[f]unctionary furniture [is] functionally arranged, [with] no decorations” (91).

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<sup>93</sup> Brown 60.

Moreover, “[t]he walls [are] bright with fresh paint, the waste baskets ree[k] of disinfectant” (98). When Holly arrives at the 1069<sup>th</sup> Intelligence Compound to replace his predecessor who was presumably assassinated by several defiant subordinates, he is disgusted by the slackened discipline of the GIs and the disorders taking place in the compound, and sets about reformation of the base. It should be noted that Wright narrates Holly’s reformatory mission in parallel with the US military’s destruction of the Vietnamese land, and projects him as an apotheosis of the US environmental warfare to clear the recalcitrant Vietnamese jungle and of the evangelical theory of the US foreign policies. When Holly inspects the GIs’ barracks, he is appalled by the disarray prevailing therein, especially by the “The Big Board”—a collage of monstrous size that the GIs created upon the back wall of their barracks by pasting miscellaneous scraps of paper thereon such as “news clippings, paperback book covers, army manual pages, C-ration boxes, record albums, letters, photographs” and so forth (120). Although the earlier scraps are faded or peeled off by the elapse of time and the forces of nature, the GIs keep supplying it with newer contributions, so “the board continue[s] to renew itself like some exotic snake” (121). As Lucas Carpenter argues, “The Board is a quintessential egalitarian, non-hegemonic postmodern artifact.”<sup>94</sup> It is indeed obvious that Wright

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<sup>94</sup> Lucas Carpenter, “‘It Don’t Mean Nothing’: Vietnam War Fiction and Postmodernism,” *College Literature* Vol. 30, No.2 (Spring, 2003): 30–50. 41.

depicts the board as a symbol representing potentially subversive elements extant within the base. As opposed to the controlled space imposed by the military authorities wherein each GI is stripped of his individuality and is forced to serve as a replaceable part of the gigantic machines of mass destruction, the board is conceived to be a radically democratic, “anarchistic” space free from such strict control by the supreme central power: “There [i]s no one in charge of The Board, no one to arbitrate questions of form, harmony, and taste. Any member of the 1069<sup>th</sup> with an item he consider[s] suitable [i]s free to paste it up himself” (120). In this way, the fragments of the individual GIs personal history are gathered together and continue to create chaotic, subversive visions such as “the oversized head of Mickey Mouse decapitated by the Cobra helicopter streaming rockets into the U.S. Capital dome that [i]s a beanie on the head of Ho Chi Minh” (121). I would argue that the self-generating, organic visions of The Board, besides resembling the regenerative snake skin, also acquire the resilience of the Vietnamese natural world and people that continue invading the US base, undaunted by the mass destruction brought about by the US military machines. Major Holly, therefore, regards the GIs’ billets and The Board as a space infected by abominable disease. Simon, Griffin’s comrade, grumbles that the major looked “like Queen Victoria visiting a leper colony” when he inspected their quarters (120). Disgusted by the subversive chaos

abounding in the base, Holly enforces his reformation plans to reeducate the GIs and to clean the compound, as if he prescribes a necessary medication for the sinful patients, forbidding the GIs to grow their hair and beard, and ordering them to wear their outfits properly and paint in white all the billets' walls, including The Big Board.

Importantly, Wright suggests that in undertaking the reformation, Holly identifies himself with Wyatt Earp, the legendary Western gunfighter, who, like many other Western heroes, has been worshipped by Americans as a kind of mythic character, what Richard Slotkin calls the “cult of gunfighter,” whose heroic images have been repeatedly reproduced in films and other forms of cultural representation, rather than remembered as an actual historical figure.<sup>95</sup> Immediately after his arrival at the base, Holly regards the 1069<sup>th</sup> Intelligence Group compound as “Dodge City before the Earp brothers. Holly want[s] an immediate cleanup, wash and wipe from the motor pool to the flight ramp” (96). That is, Holly attempts to assume the role of a “town-tamer,” in much the same way as Henry Fonda’s Wyatt Earp in John Ford’s *My Daring Clementine* (1946), who strives to redress social injustice and “empower” the “descent folks” by defeating a gang of criminals and rogues.<sup>96</sup> In the major’s eyes the insubordinate GIs demoralized by the forces of the foreign tropical climate and the recalcitrant Vietnamese guerrillas

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<sup>95</sup> Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation; The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998) 379, and passim.

<sup>96</sup> Slotkin 379.

respectively appear to be the Western outlaws and the hostile Indians who imposes social injustice upon decent, good citizens of the frontier town. On the other hand, in Holly's vision, the good town folks signify both "decent" Americans at home who support the cause of the US military interventionism, and "good" Vietnamese people who have been threatened by the communists and protected under the auspice of Americans. In this way, Holly establishes his self-image as a frontier hero who remedies the injustice, thereby figuratively legitimatizing US intervention and its military strategies in Vietnam. By describing Holly as a satire of the US military administration, the author thus attempts to indicate the connection between the medical metaphor that represents Americans as a physician medicating diseased Vietnam and the messianic self-image that the United States has cultivated through popular Western mythology.

Wright then proceeds to describe the fallacies inherent in US military intervention in Vietnam and in its imagined association with the surgeon/savior by narrating the failure of Major Holly's cleansing missions. In spite of all his efforts, Holly fails to control the various subversive elements—the demoralized GIs, the racial tension, the drug abuse, and so forth—in the compound. Instead, his forcible ways intensifies the antagonism between the insubordinate GIs and the military authorities. Eventually, Holly becomes obsessed with the frightening idea that he might be subject to the dissident GIs'

terrorism like his immediate predecessor, and so hides himself by making Uncle Sam, the unit's Vietnamese carpenter, dig a tunnel through which he moves from "the orderly room to his hootch, his hootch to the commanding bunker" and is never seen by the GIs thereafter (302–03). The sense of irony that Wright creates in this scene is demonstrated by the fact that the Vietnamese carpenter, who helps Holly demonstrate his cowardice, is named after the personification of the US federal government—the symbol whose images the US military has used in their campaign to recruit draftees and volunteers. Moreover, despite his hatred and contempt against the Vietnamese guerrillas, Major Holly ends up living in a way quite analogous to his enemy: the tunnels and underground shelters are one of the principal strategies that the NLF and NVA adapted in their battle against the technologically superior US military forces.

Further still, using his metaphorical images, Wright depicts the untenability of the idea of controlling Vietnam in the body of Holly. As stated above, Major Holly's outlook is marked by its neat, handsome, spruced-up features that he takes great pride in. However, the narrator suggests that there is a single tiny defect that continually harasses Holly, and that despite all his meticulous cares he is never be able to eliminate or cover up: "Just minor flaw, tiny, hardly noticeable. High on the left cheek rest[s] a brown velvety mole his straying hand f[inds] unable to resist touching, rubbing, squeezing.

Hairs proliferate[s] there despite frequent plucking and the surreptitious application of various depilatories” (93). Holly is concerned that this tiny flaw might one day ruin his career, since he presumes that the maintenance of good looks—again he demonstrates his obsession with the idea of controlling one’s body—is compulsory for his successful military career trajectory: “In an age when everyone’s file [i]s arranged to read as identically as possible, careers c[an] be bent by such trifles as the pitch of a voice, the break in a smile. Appearance. In the military you c[an]’t ever forget. Burnished surfaces [a]re mandatory” (93). As such, the recalcitrant, stubborn hairs that are threatening Holly’s promotion remind one of the confusion and disorders that takes place in the compound, that may equally spoil Holly’s career, and that he and other authorities cannot take full control of nevertheless. However hard Holly attempts to tighten the regulations, the GIs stealthily find loopholes, or if they cannot, they simply develop antagonism against the officers and the military, as with the case of Trips, Griffin’s comrade, whose pet-dog is killed by Sergeant Austin during the cleaning of the billets, and who continues to hold strong hatred against the senior officer even long after the end of his service in Vietnam.

It is also worth noting that Wright describes Holly’s mole and the hair growing thereon in manners that resemble the fertile Vietnamese land and the resilient green that

hampers the US military operations: “It [i]s as if one miniscule but prominent spot ha[s] deliberately seceded from the austere well-tended country of his face, ha[s] gone *soft, mushy, fertile*” (93, emphasis added). Recalling the early part of the novel in which the visual contrast between the metallic American machines and the soft and mushy Vietnamese ground is emphasized—“Outside, in the dark, metal and machinery [are] busy churning plants and animals into garbage”—one can argue that Wright describes Holly’s mole in terms closely related to the Vietnamese natural world (21). Therefore, Holly’s obsession with his recalcitrant facial hair—“frequent plucking and the surreptitious application of various depilatories”—inevitably evokes the US military’s environmental warfare and its failure. The use of depilatories especially reminds one of the spraying of chemical defoliants such as Agent Orange to eliminate the dense tropical forest that serves to shelter the enemy forces, the effects of which Griffin observes as a herbicide researcher.

It should also be noted that Holly’s obsession with his facial hair is again Wright’s reinterpretation of the classic American literary theme of the clash between machine and nature. Reminding one of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s allegory about the mankind’s hubris to achieve the “ultimate control over Nature,” Wright suggest that Holly’s mole, the elements of Vietnamese natural world, and the various problems in the base are parallel



to Georgiana's birthmark which her scientist husband tries to eliminate in that if forcibly removed, they would fatally damage the humans who attempt it.<sup>97</sup>

Although the US environmental warfare wreaks tremendous damages upon both the Vietnamese land and people, the American characters in *Meditations in Green* are often exasperated by the sense of futility about their own efforts in the face of the over-fertile Vietnamese natural world and the extremely resilient enemy forces. As Holly is never be able to obliterate his recalcitrant facial hair, suggests Wright, the US Army cannot overcome the overwhelming forces of the Vietnamese green; nor they can control the diverse problems taking place within the base. In the following section, I will closely look at the ways in which Wright describes the inside of the 1069<sup>th</sup> Intelligence Group compound, and, by developing further his green imagery, depicts the process wherein the world of order that Americans desire to establish in Vietnam is dismantled by the forces of nature and the several problems taking place in the base.

### **The Dissolution of the American World of Order**

Although the 1069<sup>th</sup> Intelligence Group Compound looks ordered, geometrical, and technologically engineered "from the air," when examined closely, it betrays the warps and disorders that in fact abound therein. The elements of the overwhelmingly fertile Vietnamese natural world keep invading the base and spoil its design. The control tower

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<sup>97</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, "The Birthmark," *Hawthorne's Short Stories*, ed. Newton Arvin (New York: Vintage, 2011) 177–193. 177.

that the French Army abandoned after their withdrawal, which the US has inherited thereafter, is at close range “an unreliable looking structure of pocked terra cotta and fissured plaster defaced by the graffiti of three continents, the acne of war, and a perennially pubescent climate” (28). Indeed, if one looks closely at the inside of the compound, one can find the erosion of the geometrical design everywhere. Latrines are “filthy from use and lack of water” (187). Griffin tries to read the thermometer hanging on the wall outside his hut, but cannot, because the “once glossy and distinct” painted scale of graduated lines and numerals has already become “pale and freckled with rust, the enamel blistered and peeling” (268). In spite of Americans’ efforts to establish a technologically controlled world of order—“the triumph of military design”—in the Vietnamese terrain by using their efficient, high-tech machines, everything in the base in fact keeps losing its distinct contours, eroded by the elapse of time, the weather, and various forces of the Vietnamese natural world. In this way, Wright subverts the conventional binary images respectively ascribed to the US and Vietnam—the geometrical order created by machines and the chaotic jungle outside—by describing the process through which the symbolically geometrical design of the 1069<sup>th</sup> Intelligence Group Compound is gradually dismantled by and subsumed into the elements of the Vietnamese natural world. The ostensible distinction drawn between the ordered base

and the chaotic Vietnamese land dissolves as the story progresses. Moreover, besides the material destruction of the US base brought about by the forces of the Vietnamese natural world and the enemy, the binary oppositions are undermined by other forces. American military efforts to control Vietnam, which are embodied by the geometrical design of the 1069<sup>th</sup> Intelligence Group Compound and its machines, are also ruined by the problems that exist within the army itself—that is, the racial tension among the GIs, the drug abuse in the army, and so forth, which the Army cannot subdue. I would argue that, by employing his green imagery, Wright portrays the chaotic discordances taking place in the 1069<sup>th</sup> Intelligence Group Compound. In so doing, Wright tries to draw an ideological linkage between the idea of control and sanitisation—the tenet of American military strategy in Indochina—and White Americans' exploitation of indigenous people and their home land in the Western frontier past—the dark side of the national creation myth that has often been underrepresented in American official history—thereby offering an incisive literary critique of American exceptionalism and the ideology that has underpins US military intervention in Vietnam.

Besides the forces of nature that gradually encroach the geometrical design and order of the base, the problems that insubordinate GIs bring about seriously affects the Army's operations. The racial tension between several black soldiers and white

commanders is one of the gravest two. By describing the group of black dissentients, Wright attempts to reveal the racial inequality that the US military has unduly inflicted upon ethnic minorities, and describes it as a social disease that the United States has carried over from the homeland to Vietnam despite its claim that American military actions are the medical aid for the “diseased” land, Vietnam. Moreover, in so doing, the writer also tries to unearth and criticize the legacy of the white Americans’ colonialism that underlies US military policies in Indochina. The black GIs’ mutiny is led by a Private called Franklin. He organizes a group of dissident black GIs and starts to disturb the military disciplines by means of the acts of subtle insubordination and negligence. The black soldiers assign themselves a plot of the base; call it the Voodoo Hootch, where no white GIs dare to enter; and obtain their own autonomous province within the base. The black dissidents’ criticism of the war is represented by Franklin’s inflammable harangue that Griffin one day overhears. When several black fresh recruits firstly arrive at 1096<sup>th</sup> Intelligence Group Compound, Griffin finds Franklin—“founding father, chief interpreter of the white man’s military ways, and a major drug dealer”—initiates them into his clique by his fervent oratory. Wright deliberately endows the leader of the black dissidents with the name of the United States’ most prominent founding father and his distinctive skill in speech. Hereby, the author depicts black dissidents’ attempts to create

an alternative community within the base in manners that enables him to narrate the other side of American history that counters white Americans' national creation myth. The black soldiers' mutiny, therefore, also challenges the elite, white Army officials' view that regards US military intervention in Indochina as America's contemporary evangelical mission to civilize/medicate Vietnam. The black leader asserts that while the white servicemen exclusively occupy the posts of the high rank officers, the pilots, and the rear-base-sinecures, the black soldiers have been deprived of such privileges and are instead exposed to the dangers in the field everyday at extremely low wage.<sup>98</sup> Then, Franklin exclaims: "Here it is, brothers, this here's a white spook's war. Only way we get into it 'sides Sambos and cannon fodders is to put on white sheet and go off scaring and chasing these yellow folks same way The Man's been doing to us for two hundred years" (244–45). It should be noted that the character of Franklin and his group loosely resembles several leaders of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960's in that both express strong opposition to American intervention in Vietnam and in turn display keen sympathy toward Vietnamese people. Like Malcolm X and the members of the Nation of

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<sup>98</sup> For instance, at the beginning of the war "blacks comprised more than 20 percent of American combat death, about twice their proportion of the US population." The proportion of black casualties declined over the time, and for the war as a whole the black soldiers' death rate dropped down till 12.5 %. However, this would never have happened, had there not been the civil right activists'—such as Martin Luther King's—public protest. See Christian G. Appy, *Working Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam* (Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993) 18–21. For more details about the discriminatory policies adopted by the US military, see Herman Graham III, *The Brothers' Vietnam War: Black Power, Manhood, and the Military Experience* (Gainesville, FL: The University Press of Florida, 2003).

Islam during the Vietnam War era, Franklin and his “brothers” take sides not with white Americans who have long held the hegemonic position within US society and expelled the minorities from the important arena of society by their discriminatory policies, but instead with the Vietnamese as a people who, just like themselves, have been impoverished, tormented, and deprived by the wealthy and powerful white, “The Man.”<sup>99</sup>

Franklin’s speech brings out in striking contrast the difference between the military official’s concept of Vietnam represented by the captain’s lecture cited earlier and the black dissidents’ understanding of the war. Rejecting the binary opposition of the technologically advanced United States and the uncivilized Vietnam that the military officials and politicians have imagined, Franklin sympathizes with the Vietnamese enemy, by finding the material fact of poverty and inequality that the powerful white Europeans/Americans have inflicted upon the Vietnamese citizens, African Americans, and Indigenous Americans alike. By asserting that American military intervention in Indochina is the same acts of violence that the white elites have long perpetrated upon ethnic minorities, Franklin and his coterie claims that they do not take part in this contemporary American frontier enterprise to battle the Vietnamese Indians. Also, as Herman Graham III explains about the black power movement in the then US army,

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<sup>99</sup> See “Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam,” *African-American Involvement in the Vietnam War* 6 Aug. 2011 < [http://www.aavw.org/protest/homepage\\_malcolmx.html](http://www.aavw.org/protest/homepage_malcolmx.html) >.

these black dissentient characters attempt to redefine the meaning of masculinity through their criticism of “white man’s war.” For the black GIs, the ideal masculinity cannot be achieved by fulfilling the hegemonic warrior role that is assigned by the white elites but instead by resisting the war and by establishing fraternal ties that bond themselves, that also associate them with the oppressed Vietnamese people.<sup>100</sup>

Another problem that may subvert the very framework of the military administration is that of the GIs’ drug abuse. The use of cocaine and marijuana is rampant among the GIs to the extent that they become unable to fulfil their own duties. Griffin is one of many GIs that are initiated into the drug in Vietnam. Exhausted by both the strain and the tedium that alternately beset the GIs in the army compound, the protagonist starts to indulge in the feelings of comfort that the drug offers. Consequently, Griffin begins to suffer from the hallucinations that the drug induces. As Pilar Marín suggests, Wright describes the process of the protagonist’s mental disintegration through the use of cocaine and marijuana in a way that “ties in with and culminates with the base being overridden and presumably destroyed by enemy forces.”<sup>101</sup> The enemy forces that Marín explains include not only the NVA and NLF forces, but also the elements of the recalcitrant Vietnamese natural world that destroy the geometry of the base. As the US

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<sup>100</sup> Graham III 26–29, and 99–102.

<sup>101</sup> Marín explains that in *Meditations in Green* the enemy forces that afflict the US army include not only NLF and NVA forces but also the forces of the resilient tropical natural World. See Marín 137.

base gradually loses its distinct, geometrical designs, Griffin's dependence on the drug increases further and his psychological disintegration is aggravated. In other words, Wright represents the American debacle of the Vietnam War, by narrating—in parallel with the plot of the destruction of the US army base by the hostile elements of the Vietnamese land—the process in which the protagonist gradually loses his identity as an American soldier. Although “Marijuana, happily, elevate[s] tolerance levels and see[ms] to produce a beneficial air-conditioning effect on the body,” thereby letting Griffin have moments of relief from the excruciating heat and humidity of Vietnam and the strain of overnight duties, it greatly impairs his ability as a herbicide researcher. Griffin gradually loses the clear sense of time and space that is required of a damage interpreter and an herbicide researcher, thereby becoming more and more an incapable, negligent GI. Other sections of the base, therefore, start to complain about the confusion that Griffin's negligence brings about: “Air Force grumbl[es] about defaced negatives, communications about indecipherable handwritings, the pilots about mismarked targets on their flight maps”(295). However, Griffin is no longer able to wean himself from the drug at that time, having already developed a strong addiction, and this is also true of many of his comrades in the base.

It should also be noted that, besides practically spoiling the GIs' combat abilities,



marijuana and the cocaine are symbolically threatening to the US military actions in Vietnam. Firstly, as these drugs derived from plants are commonly used by the supporters of the hippie subculture that is closely associated with the anti-war protest in the late 1960s, the images of the flower children and the counterculture that the drugs, especially marijuana, evoke are evidently subversive to the military authorities.<sup>102</sup> As such, Major Holly detests the disorders taking place in the army compound brought about by the GIs' drug abuse, and calls the chaotic state "a hippie ghetto," and attempts to redress the confusion by imposing strict control upon the GIs (91–92).

Secondly, as Marijuana's vernacular name "weed" figuratively suggests, the military administration's failure to control the abuse of the drugs in the 1069<sup>th</sup> Intelligence Group Compound inevitably evokes the army's failure to control the green of Vietnam, the forces of the over-fertile natural world that constantly destroy the geometrical design of the base. Just as the US army cannot control the recalcitrant elements of the Vietnamese land, the military officers are unable to eliminate the subversive "weed" that spreads over the compound, and that spoils the discipline and the morale of the base. It should be pointed out that in paralleling the deterioration of the GIs' physique through the use of drugs and the overrunning of the base by the Vietnamese

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<sup>102</sup> For the impact that the counterculture exerted upon the anti-war movement and the US society in the Vietnam era, see Charles DeBenedetti, *An American Ordeal. The Antiwar Movement of the Vietnam Era* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1990) 160–162.

natural world, Wright also implies another process of destruction that proceeds within and without the 1069<sup>th</sup> Compound: the destruction of the “body” of the nation. While marijuana and cocaine keep wracking the body and the spirit of the GIs and the elements of nature encroach the geometrical design of the base, these problems also devastate the integrity of the body of the United States—the image of salubrious human body that the eminent early settler John Winthrop, or leading American intellectuals such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman, among others, have envisioned as a symbol of the unity of America.<sup>103</sup> As once Griffin observes, the world of order that the US Army attempts to establish upon Vietnam using their abundant resources and superior technology is virtually a mimesis of American cityscape. Except for a few Vietnamese who serve for the most menial chores such as latrine attendants and barracks maids, “everyone around was quite American, speaking American, eating American, driving American, reading American, [...] , the sky itself crisscrossed dense as grandma’s knitting with American aircraft and American wire” (251). However, the reality of this miniature American society does not have the slightest similarity to the wholesome corporeal unity that the previous American authors have imagined.

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<sup>103</sup> John Winthrop, “A Modell of Christian Charity,” *Hanover Historical Text Project* August 1996, 8 October 2011 <<http://history.hanover.edu/texts/winthmod.html>>. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “American Scholar,” *Political Writings*, ed. Kenneth Sacks (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008) 11–27. Walt Whitman, “Democratic Vistas,” *Complete Prose Works* (Philadelphia: David Mackay, 1892) 203–58.

If, as John William Draper—a renowned American scientist and historian, whom Whitman had known personally—affirmed, “social advancement is as completely under the control of natural law as bodily growth” and “[t]he life of an individual is a miniature of the life of nation,” the body of US society that the Army creates in Vietnam is ailing with no less problems than the antebellum America or the post-Reconstruction United States that Emerson, Whitman, and other critics of the US early modern society observed.<sup>104</sup> Likewise, across the Pacific, the United States’ mainland during the time of the Vietnam War also suffered the dismemberment of its parts and organs, as it was divided by the unceasing debate about the war and various other political/societal issues.<sup>105</sup>

With this, Wright suggests that despite the authorities’ claim that the US military intervention is a necessary medication for the diseased Vietnam, the US has actually

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<sup>104</sup> Quoted in Harold Aspitz, “The Body Politic in *Democratic Vistas*,” *Walt Whitman: The Centennial Essays*, ed. Ed Folsom (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 1994) 105–119. 107.

<sup>105</sup> Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, for instance, argue that “[i]n the course of the 1960’s, many Americans came to regard groups of fellow countrymen as enemies with whom they are engaged in a struggle for the nation’s very soul. White versus blacks, liberals versus conservatives (as well as liberals versus radicals), young versus old, men versus women, hawks versus doves, rich versus poor, ... the hip versus the straight, the gay versus the straight—everywhere one looked, new battalions took to the field, in a spirit ranging from that of redemptive sacrifice to vengeful defiance” (5). Moreover, there were divides even within a group of people who ostensibly shared a same goal, as with the case of the radical activists such as Malcolm X, who bitterly rejected the sanguine vision of black people’s integration with white American’s society that Martin Luther King Jr. and his supporters advocated (172–75). For a detailed account of the American cultural war during the 60s’, see their *America Divided: the Civil War of the 1960s* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

brought their own social diseases from its homeland and transplanted them upon the foreign Vietnamese land. Worse still, the miniature United States cannot even cure diseases of their own: the authorities' attempts to restrict drug abuse and to control the dissident black soldiers all end up in failure. Moreover, many of the GIs, the miniaturized America's very constituents, are crippled or killed in the battle or by the enemy's traps day after day. The mutilated members of the US Army are not considered to be an organic, irreplaceable part of the body, but are regarded as mere machine parts that can be replenished/replaced by the legion of new recruits who are daily dispatched from the homeland. Far from being a salubrious, autonomous individual who is bestowed with the egalitarian sensitivity of freedom and self-reliance, thereby constituting the wholesome body of truly democratic America, the GIs in Vietnam are deprived of their autonomy and are degraded into mere dispensable parts of the massive military apparatuses.

As examined above, employing his unique metaphorical/intratextual narrative device, Wright describes the failures of American military efforts in manners that subvert the conventional images of Vietnam as a diseased land and its people as pathogens. Wright's subversive vision culminates in a latter part of the novel, when Griffin volunteers to join a team of GIs to search a missing US helicopter and its crew in the remote mountains. As the protagonist has hitherto served exclusively within the

perimeter of the 1069<sup>th</sup> Intelligence Group Compound, he has never marched across the Vietnamese rainforest. This time, however, he goes beyond the boundary of the US base, and experiences the forces of the Vietnamese natural world at first hand. Through this incident, Griffin recognizes the futility of the US attempts to fully control the resilient, over fertile Vietnamese rainforest. Immediately after landing on the remote jungle terrain, Griffin is overwhelmed by the immensity and lushness of the Vietnamese rainforest and observes that America's attempts to control the tropical botany will never succeed: "[t]he effort to bring down this house, of which Griffin [i]s a part, seem[s] at this close distance to be both frightening and ludicrous" (277). Significantly, in this episode Wright describes the tropical forest in a way that again subverts the binary scheme—the geometrical, controlled space of the US base and the chaotic, insanitary Vietnamese wilderness—that the US military authorities such as Major Holly have attempted to inculcate into the GIs' mind. As the dense forest consists of the extremely intricate web of diverse plants, it appears in Griffin's eyes to be a gigantic gothic architecture constructed and decorated in ways too complex and enormous for any human being to comprehend its entire structure:

The hall way opened into other halls, the tall ornate stairs led to identical stairs even higher—jungle as architecture—pillar after pillar, arches framing arches, rope and tiered balconies, Gothic ornamental expanding *geometrically* in every direction, and below, who could be certain what was bubbling and fizzing down that crypt. (277, emphasis added)

The narrator uses here the image of geometry, which the American characters have theretofore solely ascribed to the characteristic of their own technologically engineered American space, to designate the complex design of the Vietnamese jungle. In so doing, Wright undermines the false, simplistic association created between Vietnam and insanitary, formless chaos. Whereupon, the author asserts that besides the chaos of the “bubbling and fizzing” pathogens, the law of geometry is also a part of the larger designs of Nature, whose great forces of regeneration and destruction any human technology cannot fully control. Further to this point, here in this jungle scene, the image of enormous machinery, the symbol of America’s superior technology, is inverted and assumes a different metaphorical meaning:

[...] he [Griffin] realize[s] that were he to die in here among those botanical springs and gears, *a Green Machine larger and more efficient than any human bureaucracy or mechanical invention* would promptly initiate the indifferent process of converting flesh and dreams into plant food. He f[eels] weak, out of shape” (277, emphasis added).

In Griffin’s revelatory vision, Nature itself appears as a colossal machine by far more efficient, and further intricately engineered than any American high-technological war machines. Any human contrivances to control its great forces, therefore, are ultimately determined to fail. As such, Wright contends that the US military strategies to control the Vietnamese land by their machines eventually turn out to be partial and futile, and that the binary scheme of American imaginative geography is by no means tenable.

Wright's vision of the Vietnamese rainforest as "Green Machine"—a gothic architecture by far more complex, gigantic, and powerful than America's military machines figuratively signifies the defeat of America's technology in its battle against Nature. Developing the traditional literary theme of the clash between machine and nature that Emerson, Hawthorne and others have explored, Wright describes the US military's attempts to control the diversity and the resilience of the Vietnamese natural world with its machines as America's hubristic acts destined to fail. In so doing, the author also criticizes the ways in which US military officials and politicians have tried to impose upon the complex realities of Vietnam their own vindictive theory of the war that regards US military interventionism as America's contemporary evangelical mission to civilize/sanitize Vietnam.

### Chapter Three: Robert Olen Butler's Desertion Narrative: *The Alleys of Eden*

#### American Youth and the Romanticized Images of Combat

I came from San Jose, California. I grew up in the suburbs and went to public school. I lived on the last block of a new development surrounded on three sides by apricot orchards and vineyards. The high school was typically middle class. There were very few blacks. We had warm weather and cars. Most of the kids' dads were engineers at Lockheed or they worked at IBM. Most of my friends were preparing for a college degree.<sup>106</sup>

In this way, an anonymous Vietnam vet in Mark Baker's Vietnam War oral history book, *Nam*, begins to tell the story of his own early youth in the suburban hometown. He recalls his town and high school as "typically middle class," where most of its members enjoy the affluence of post Second World War US society; both of the companies, in which the majority of the male adults worked, were closely related to US military industry, and were the vehicle for America's economic prosperity during the early Cold War era. The Vietnam vet, then, briefly recalls the ways in which many of the town's youngsters spent their pastime—going to psychedelic music concerts and smoking marijuana—and tells the reader how he despised the mundane lifestyle of his peers. For, after all, it seemed to him that they were by no means "pioneers" who endeavored to create new meanings of life, but are merely a "trendy group" who just "wanted to be the first" (7). Despite all of their pseudo-anti social, rebellious postures, most of his

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<sup>106</sup> Mark Baker, *Nam: The Vietnam War in the Words of Men and Women Who Fought There* (London: Abacus, 1988) 7.



classmates were preparing to go to college so as to make themselves, too, a part of this middle class society, and he could not stand their hypocrisy and the tedious prospect that awaited them. Therefore, the Vietnam-vet implies that he decided to enlist in the Army and went to Vietnam as an act of non-conformism, his own way to escape from and defy the mediocre American suburban life. At that time, the war in Vietnam had already erupted and every one of his classmates was desperately trying to evade or delay the draft by entering college; therefore, by enlisting in the Army and going to the foreign uncivilized terrain right after high school graduation, he could become the genuinely first one, a “pioneer.” The Vietnam-vet’s sentiment then is succinctly surmised in his remark as follows: “who wants to do what everybody else does anyway” (7)?

In addition to the desire to escape pedestrian suburban life, the interviewee suggests that, in enlisting in the Army, he was particularly attracted by an idea that regarded war and the battlefield as a locus wherein man demonstrates his manhood. He remembers that he “had read all the war fiction,” and that although “[i]t never had a particular fascination for [him] ... it implanted this idea in [his] mind that war was a place for you to discover things” (7). Further to this point, the male adults of his family didn’t go to World War II, and he was disappointed by their effeminate excuses—“Oh, well, I was in college”—and, in looking back, he thinks that this in part led him to

decide to enlist, because he believed that “[i]t was a major historical event and that convulsed the world, and yet they missed it. I was perfect age to participate in Vietnam and I didn’t want to miss it, good or bad” (7). Although the Vietnam-vet does not specify what kinds of “things” he expected to find in the Vietnamese battlefield, his remarks indicate that in choosing the Army and foreign warzone, he desired to identify himself with the romantic images of warriors in war fictions and American soldiers in the triumphant World War II, in which the United States military played the role of a liberator of both Europe and Asia from the threats of the fascist Axis powers.

Baker’s *Nam* aims to and largely succeeds in including as many accounts of those who participated in the war as possible given the book’s length of fewer than two hundred and fifty pages. For instance, the first part of the book, which deals with twenty-one interviewees’ “initiation” to the military, contains the stories of a Black Muslim soldier, and a nurse, among other working and middle class white American males of different backgrounds. Nonetheless, some of these stories narrate a certain type of narrative that has been prevalent among the Vietnam-vets’ accounts: a type of story that begins with an innocent, young American youth’s fascination with romantic images of war, that then narrates traumatic incidents he encounters in the war, and that ends in his ultimate disillusionment with the military. Another veteran who also has white

middleclass background was drafted in 1968. Although he did not believe in the legitimacy of America's military intervention in Indochina and was afraid of many dangers that he was to face in the warzone, he remembers that he was nonetheless attracted by the idea of joining the Army and going to the war: "With all my terror of going into the Army ... there was something seductive about it, too. I was seduced by World War II and John Wayne movies. When I was in high school, I dreamed of going to Annapolis" (12). Thus, he refrained from making attempts to defer/evade the draft and chose to go to Vietnam.

The accounts of the Vietnam-vets that Baker collected remind us of several representative Vietnam War memoirs written by ex-soldier-authors such as Ron Kovic's *Born on the Forth of July* (1976) and Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War* (1977). Critic John Hellmann describes those memoirs as narrating "a common tale in which the youthful protagonist leaves behind the society of his immediate father to connect with the cultural father by entering the frontier in Vietnam. There he suffers the traumatic shock of finding that he has instead entered a crazily inverted landscape of American myth frustrating all of his expectations."<sup>107</sup> Indeed, several Vietnam-vets' "initiation" accounts in Baker's *Nam* and the early parts of Caputo's and Kovic's memoir both describe the

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<sup>107</sup> John Hellmann, *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: Colombia University Press, 1986) 161.

ways in which young Americans were driven to the war in Vietnam by a kind of anti-modern impulse that is closely related to the myth of the frontier. The Vietnam vet interviewees suggests that they had been disappointed in the world of their immediate fathers, American suburban townscape, and thus decided to go to the remote battlefield, in which they aspired to fight against the Vietnamese foe as bravely as their mythic fathers/heroes such as John Wayne and other heroic fighters represented in the myriad of American combat romances.

Ron Kovic, for instance, narrates that by the time he graduated from high school, he had been discontented with the unpromising, tedious prospect of life that seemed to await him in his hometown—the world of his immediate father. The job at a supermarket that his father had found for Kovic appeared to be enervating his youthful vigour, and the young Kovic thought: “I didn’t want to be like my Dad, coming home from the A&P every night. He was a strong man, but it made him so tired, it took all the energy out of him.”<sup>108</sup> After attending the US Marines recruiters’ talk in the spring of his senior year at the school, Kovic was so moved by their patriotic speech as well as their polished but manly appearance that he felt as if “[i]t was like all the movies and all the dream of a hero come true” (81). He finally decided to enlist in the Marines, hoping that he would also fight like the cinematic heroes such as John Wayne and Audie Murphy,

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<sup>108</sup> Ron Kovic, *Born on the Forth of July* (New York: Akashic Books, 2005) 81.

whose heroic battles and adventures in films had fascinated him since childhood, and thus entered the world of the mythic fathers.

Having examined several Vietnam-vets' accounts of their youthful fascination with the heroic representations of the World War II, it is particularly important to note that, as Richard Slotkin argues, in Americans' mythic perspective the Second World War has been intimately identified with the Indian War of the Western Frontier. For instance, both during and after World War II, major American media and film industry interpreted the war in the southern Pacific theatre against Japanese as another "savage" Indian War, in which the US military played the role of courageous Western rangers and Japanese the role of ruthless, savage, and cunning bad Indians.<sup>109</sup> Moreover, John Wayne—the iconic cinematic hero whose heroic images innumerable American boys of Vietnam generation enthused about—played both the roles of frontier gunmen in the Western and heroic officers/soldiers in WW II combat films; thus, the actor has assumed the images of goodness, heroism and ideal manhood that American soldiers supposedly demonstrated in both wars. Therefore, it would not be so farfetched to assert that in those American boys' imaginations the land of Vietnam was figured as an extension of the Indian battlefield—a naively popularized version of the Turnerian frontier—where

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<sup>109</sup> Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998) 318–343.

they themselves would achieve great military feats like the mythic American warriors. Indeed, Philip Caputo depicts his initial impulse to enter the military life in terms fully charged with the imagery of the mythic frontier. For him escaping from his hometown, Westchester, Illinois—a place of “suburban boredom and desolation”—and fighting in the remote battlefield to “prove [...] my courage, my toughness, my manhood” is almost to fulfil a dream of nostalgia for the “savage, heroic” past of America, to regain a lost inheritance, the imagined virtues of mythic “moccasined feet” frontiersmen who explored the New World wilderness.<sup>110</sup>

Caputo seems to downplay the impact that the social climate of the late 1950s and early 1960s had had upon his decision to enlist—“I joined in the Marines in 1960, partly because I got swept up in the patriotic tide of Kennedy era but mostly because I was sick of safe, suburban existence I had known most of my life”—and ascribes the greatest reason behind his enlistment to his personal dislike for effeminate suburban life (5). However, young Caputo’s aspiration to fight in foreign terrain has in fact much in common with the then dominant public exposition of US counterinsurgencies in the Third World countries in that both attempt to place Vietnam in America’s mythic historical perspective. As Slotkin discusses, in seeking US citizens’ support, the young president John F Kennedy drew on the language of the national creation myth and

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<sup>110</sup> Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (London: Pimlico, 1999) 5–6.

symbolically established himself as “a new kind of frontiersman confronting a different sort of wilderness” as clearly exemplified in his inaugural speech in 1961.<sup>111</sup> Furthermore, amongst the three major aspects of the new Democratic agenda—the revitalization of economy, the improvement of domestic social injustice, and the “containment” of Communist power in the Third World—the third was the biggest concern for Kennedy. In “protecting” undeveloped countries from the threats of communists, Kennedy proposed to take aggressive, “heroic” actions and propelled young generations to take part in the nation’s noble endeavour. Therefore, in the Kennedy administration’s exegesis of Cold War foreign policies, countries such as Vietnam were conceived to be a new “frontier” where a “whole new generation of Americans” was to battle bravely against Indian-like communist enemy and expand American influence and power.<sup>112</sup>

In this way, the battlefield of Vietnam for Americans of the Vietnam generation was not merely a physical ground on which they were expected to fight against foes, but also a symbolic space closely associated with conventional images of courage, heroism and manhood of frontier mythology. In other words, the official exposition of counter offensive in the Third World and the romantic ideas about combat and the frontier in the

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<sup>111</sup> Slotkin 2.

<sup>112</sup> Slotkin 489–497.

early '60s served to create an American imaginative geography of Vietnam as an extension of the mythic Indian War battlefield. Historian Christian G Appy suggests that economic as well as racial inequity were far more decisive factors than the romantic views of the battlefield that compelled American youngsters to Vietnam.<sup>113</sup> However, as Appy himself admits, the impact that society's dominant ideas about the counterinsurgency and Vietnam had upon young Americans of Vietnam era is "hard to exaggerate."<sup>114</sup> These certainly helped to mask the questionable nature of US intervention in Indochina and propelled Americans to fight, by placing the conflict in Vietnam in the context of the myth of America's good wars.

If American authors write the stories of GIs who escape from the warzone, one can argue that, in so doing, they in effect attempt to create a new type of (anti-) American hero who challenges conventional images of heroism and masculinity stemming from the myth of the Frontier and America's just wars. These GIs escape from the Vietnamese warzone, risking not only legal prosecution but also the fact of their being American men. For, besides being a physical battleground, the Vietnamese terrain that they try to desert is also a symbolic space where the GIs are supposed to demonstrate their legitimate bond with America's mythic fathers, by engaging in violent battles against their evil enemy.

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<sup>113</sup> Christian G. Appy, *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993) 44–85.

<sup>114</sup> Appy 60.



Therefore, in this chapter I will closely read Robert Olen Butler's first novel *The Alleys of Eden* (1981), wherein the protagonist escapes from the war and seeks a refuge in Saigon's streets, and illuminate the ways in which the writer challenges the convention of regarding Vietnam as an update of the Frontier battlefield.

### **Robert Olen Butler's Anti-hero: An Escape from the Vietnamese Battleground**

Robert Olen Bulter's *The Alleys of Eden* tells the story of Clifford Wilkes, who deserts the war and hides in a street corner of Saigon with his Vietnamese lover, Lanh. I would argue that Butler's first novel merits a close examination, since, firstly, it attempts to narrate a story of an American male protagonist whose escape from the Vietnamese warzone in many ways contradicts the vision of Vietnam as an update of Indian War and the legacy of American imperialism closely associated with the frontier mythology. Secondly, as Katherine M. Puhr asserts, *The Allays of Eden* is notable among American war novels in that it is one of the first American Vietnam War fictions that attempted to give a Vietnamese character a central role and to create "the most fully developed portrayal of a Vietnamese woman" in this genre of novels and stories.<sup>115</sup> Throughout his literary career, Robert Olen Butler has consistently returned to the memory of the war and the landscape of Vietnam to describe the challenges arising from the conflict that

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<sup>115</sup> Katherine M. Puhr, "Women in Vietnam War Novels," *Search and Clear: Critical Response to Selected Literature and Films of the Vietnam War*, ed. William J. Searle (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1988) 172–183. 172.

confront Americans and Vietnamese alike. Even though most American writers before and after him have conferred only a marginal role upon the Vietnamese people, almost making them mere backdrop of the stories of GIs' suffering, Butler—a Vietnam-vet writer whose ability in Vietnamese language led him to serve as a translator during his service in the war—tries to bring Vietnamese characters to the foreground of the story by imagining their own voice(s) and invites the reader to understand the complex, multifaceted, and transnational realities of the war. Just as Lanh, the heroine of the first novel, struggles to adjust to life in the United States after she relocates there with the protagonist, so twelve Vietnamese immigrants in *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* (1992)—a collection of short stories, which received Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1993—narrate, in their own voices, the stories of their complex identities, torn between two different cultures. Therefore, although *The Alleys of Eden* has not yet received considerable critical attention, I would maintain that a close examination of the Vietnamese heroin's role in the novel will lead us fully to understand both the particularities and development of Vietnamese characters in Butler's later significant works as well as in the entire corpus of American Vietnam War fictions.

However, it should also be noted that the critical reception of Butler's Vietnam fictions by the few scholars and critics who have extensively examined Butler's works

considerably varies and often conflicts with one another. The debate between Renny Christopher and Maureen Ryan offers us an interesting case in point. Christopher attempts to question the canon formation of American Vietnam War literature by criticizing the marginalization of the Vietnamese in Euro–American writers’ accounts and by closely reading the works of Vietnamese–immigrant writers that have often been neglected by American commercial and scholarly readership. Having examined the long history of the stereotypical representation and the underrepresentation of Asians people in Euro–American writers’ works, Christopher recognizes Butler as one of the few White American Vietnam War writers who has tried to and succeeded in transcending the paradigms of American cultural mythology by representing a bicultural experiences of the war observed by both Americans and the Vietnamese.<sup>116</sup> On the other hand, Maureen Ryan criticizes Butler for his uncritical embrace of the tradition of American macho heroism. Ryan argues that although Clifford Wilkes and other leading male characters of Butler’s Vietnam novels are ostensibly different from the warrior–heroes of combat romances, these “strong, stoic” characters are nonetheless the “descendants of the Deerslayer, John Wayne, and John Rambo” in their own complex ways; they are in fact

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<sup>116</sup> Renny Christopher, *The Vietnam War American War: Images and Representations in Euro–American and Vietnamese Exile Narratives* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995) 1–23, 267–296.

the “modern variations of ‘American Adam’.”<sup>117</sup> Therefore, according to Ryan, Butler’s Vietnam novels, after all, too comfortably fit into the mould of conventional American war narratives that have reproduced romantic images of white masculine heroes in America’s good wars as well as biased images of the Third World and its people.

I certainly agree with Ryan about her insightful suggestion that, in creating the character of Clifford Wilkes, Butler, to a certain extent, follows the traditional framework of the American Adam. However, I would argue that Ryan confuses the perspectives of the fictional characters and Butler, the living author; hence her somewhat hasty conclusion: “I suspect that Butler admires his protagonists, and expects us to do so as well, for their strong individualism and their metaphysical journeys [...] . He wants us to acknowledge them as leaner, meaner, purer than men who haven’t had a Vietnam experience [...] .”<sup>118</sup> I would rather contend that, as Christopher explains about the character of Lanh, the two protagonists of the novel—Clifford Wilkes and Lanh—are complicated characters “who both resis[t] and pla[y] with the stereotypes.”<sup>119</sup> Moreover, Butler attempts to describe the devastating effects that the Vietnam War inflicted upon individuals—both Americans and the Vietnamese—through the very process in which the protagonists try to break the fetters of stereotypes, even though they eventually fail to

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<sup>117</sup> Maureen Ryan, “Robert Olen Butler’s Vietnam Veterans: Stranger in an Alien Home,” *The Midwest Quarterly* Vol.38, No.3 (Spring 1997): 274–294. 279.

<sup>118</sup> Ryan 293.

<sup>119</sup> Christopher 268.

do so.

I would further maintain that to fully examine Butler's attempts to challenge conventional US imagery of war and heroism as well as the ways in which he creates the character of the Vietnamese heroine, we should particularly pay close attention to the Vietnamese and American landscapes perceived by the protagonist. Throughout *The Alleys of Eden*, Butler traces Clifford Wilkes's peregrination across the vast landscapes of Vietnam and North America. No less important than the journey between the two separate spaces in the protagonist's odyssey is his spiritual voyages across two different cultures. As I will presently demonstrate, along with Clifford's physical migration between Vietnam and the United States, Butler follows the protagonist's changing attitudes towards the cultures of his own homeland and the foreign country. Firstly appearing as a typical American hero who is discontented with the tedium of life in American cities, Clifford identifies himself with conventional American images of heroism and manhood embodied by the Army. In the protagonist's eyes, therefore, initially the land of Vietnam first and foremost appears to be an uncivilized, frontier-like foreign battlefield that attracts him with its lures of cinematic adventures. However, one critical event in which Clifford takes part in—killing of an Vietcong suspect—drastically changes the course of his life, and immediately afterwards the protagonist

decides to desert the army and at the same time rejects the American military/masculine ideal he has theretofore identified himself with any longer. It is particularly important to note that in keeping with Clifford's conversion, the land of Vietnam transforms its contours, and presents another aspect that is quite different from the conventional representation of Vietnam as an extension of mythic Indian War battlefield. For, by deserting battlefield and the Army, Clifford also rejects an American imaginative geography that regards Vietnam as an extension of the frontier warzone. Hiding in a street corner of Saigon with his Vietnamese lover, the protagonist now looks at an aspect of the Vietnamese land that has rarely been described in American accounts of the war: Vietnam as a homeland for its own people; a space filled with the lively activities of the Vietnamese citizens; an ancestral land on which the long history and the culture of the indigenous people have deeply been inscribed.

Pitched against American cityscapes seen by the protagonist, however, the description of Vietnamese villages and Saigon's streets also helps to shed light upon Clifford's complex relationship with the colonial mentality that underlies the American national creation myth. Although the hero attempts to overthrow conventional US ideas about war, masculinity, and heroism that have been associated with the myth of the Wild West, his perception of Vietnam, its people and culture is still framed by traditional

American frontier narratives: instead of the vision of Vietnam as an Indian battlefield where American men are supposed to achieve their military feats, Clifford now regards Vietnam as an update of the Edenic New World garden. In so doing, the protagonist in effect identifies his Vietnamese lover with the fertile land of Vietnam, and genders the foreign land as an essentially feminine space, as early European settlers did to the resourceful natural world of the New Continent. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily diminish Butler's achievement, since, contrary to Ryan's criticism, the author is aware of Clifford's problematic relationship with American mythology, and time and again destroys the protagonist's illusions about Vietnam. As I will demonstrate later, one of the novel's most cogent artistic achievements in fact lies in the ways Butler reveals particularly American cultural frameworks that preconfigures the protagonist's perception of Vietnam, and demonstrates the untenability of defining Vietnam in terms of America's own national creation mythology.

In order to examine Clifford's changing perceptions of the Vietnamese landscape, we should firstly pay close attention to the ways in which Butler creates the character of the protagonist. Book One, the first half of *The Alleys of Eden*, takes place in the very night of the Fall of Saigon in April 1975, as, in the bedroom of Lanh's apartment in Saigon, Clifford Wilkes remembers the significant events of his life that eventually

brought him to a street corner of the South Vietnamese capital, wondering whether or not, and how he should escape to the United States with his Vietnamese lover. Butler narrates the protagonist's experiences in the United States and Vietnam until the Fall of Saigon, by describing the flash-backs of earlier events that spring to Clifford's mind. In the beginning Clifford appears as a stereotypical American hero who is attracted to the expectations of violent adventures in a foreign terrain. Like the narrator-protagonist of Caputo's and Kovic's memoirs, Clifford in his youth is disappointed in the dreary prospects of life in American cities. He has been neglected by his parents, and his marriage with Francine, his college sweetheart, quickly sours. Thus, in the United States the protagonist cannot build any intimate relationship with others and eventually he decides to enlist in the Army in order to seek a way out from the dreadful tedium of American suburban life.

It should be noted that in the protagonist's early experience in Vietnam, the land of Vietnam appears to fit into the framework of America's stereotypical representations of Vietnam in that he conceives it to be a foreign extension of Indian War battleground. Butler intentionally plays with the conventional imagery of Vietnam so that he can describe the protagonist's initial fascination with the Army and subvert it later, when the harsh realities of violence disrupt Clifford's vision. Immediately after arriving in



Vietnam, Clifford is enthused with the sense of rejuvenation that he feels in the uncivilized foreign environment:

He was afraid, but at the same time he felt a simple, undeniable freedom. The bright sun, the dark-earthed ditches with dirt clods at hand, a stand of trees. The smell of earth and heat, the feel of the road were the same smell and feel of the days of summer vacation from grade school. The dirt clods to stockpile, the ditch to hide in the trees to assault as a boy.<sup>120</sup>

In this way, in the beginning of his service Clifford conceives Vietnam, the foreign battleground, to be a sort of athletic playground, where frustrated American youth can fully vent their vigour and be rejuvenated by engaging in what seems like a sequel of their childhood mock war games.

Clifford's vision of Vietnam as an update of frontier battlefield is further intensified by the close bond with his fellow soldiers, a kind of which he have never been able to establish in the United States since his adolescence. A small episode that takes place in the Army highlights the intimate comradeship that Clifford finds in in the Vietnamese battlefield. When one of his comrades, Wilson, breaks his arms as the result of his childish prank, the fellow soldiers of the intelligence unit where Clifford serves gather around the injured GI and attentively look after him. Upon seeing Captain Fleming, the unit's chief, rebuke Wilson for his recklessness and examine the injury in a "gentle" and "concerned" way, Clifford feels "the link to Fleming, to Wilson" (33).

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<sup>120</sup> Robert Olen Butler, *The Alleys of Eden* (London: Vintage, 2002) 5.

Furthermore, Clifford is so deeply touched by the captain's earnest, fraternal care for his subordinate, that he wonders if the true reason of the war is none of the grand theories and causes proclaimed by the government and authorities—the battle against communists, expanding American influence overseas, the South Vietnamese territorial integrity and so forth—but only to obtain a “moment like this” (33). Although Wilson's accident happens in a non-combat zone, Clifford supposes that “in battle these moments [may be] enhanced,” for the very risk of death would bring all the men even closer. Whereupon, he sees a vision of perfectly harmonious human relationship in which a dying soldier lies in a firm embrace of his comrades:

If Wilson lay there dying from a rifle round or a shard of shrapnel, wouldn't this death transformed into a moment of intense connectedness around him? And even for Wilson himself. In the final moments he would feel the grip of another human being on his hand, his shoulder, his head would be cradled by another human being and he'd be the center of that momentary, perfect universe beyond petty concerns, beyond trivial needs, a universe held together in empty space by the force of human connection. (33)

The excessively homo-social, even homo-erotic vision of the dying soldier “cradled” in the firm grip of his comrades, in the protagonist's mind, assumes almost the religious sublimity of Pieta. In this way by delving into the protagonist's mind, Butler suggests that, to Clifford, the Vietnamese battleground initially appears to be a space filled with the lures of violent adventures. As the mythic frontier battleground of the New World once did, the Vietnamese terrain places Americans in the midst of life-threatening

dangers. However, the very fact of the proximity to dangers allows Clifford to lead a genuinely intense life that surpasses the “petty concerns” and “trivial needs” of mediocre, effeminate Americans, and that allows him to realize a “perfect universe” of intimate comradeship with his fellow GIs. Moreover, by identifying the injured soldier surrounded by his fellow GIs with a vision of dying Christ embraced by the Virgin Mary, Clifford re-enacts the conventional theme of innocent America Adam. That is, Clifford conceives his fellow American soldiers to be selfless, courageous warriors who, without a thought of personal loss or self-interest, strive to fight the enemy and help their comrades; thus, they are innocent individuals immune from the corruption and avarice of American urban life. Like the GIs in John Wayne’s combat films, they are imagined to be self-sacrificing individuals fighting in America’s just war.

Further still, just as eminent American writers in the nineteenth century regarded the mythic frontier as a “time free” space unspoiled by the history and the social diseases of the Old World, so Clifford sees the uncivilized Vietnamese terrain as a “time free” space untouched by the aging American civilization, where he can forget his earlier experiences in the United States and be reborn as an innocent youth.<sup>121</sup> Indeed, all the things he has left behind in America—the experiences of divorce, of failures in

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<sup>121</sup> R.W.B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1955) 90.

friendship, of the breakup of his family, the memory of the enervating illness that infected his late father—represent aging and decay that he abhors. By contrast, the Vietnamese land and the intimate relationship with his fellow soldiers remind Clifford of infancy, innocence, and redemption. Therefore, in the beginning of his service Clifford supposes that he can abandon all the ominous signs of senility and become rejuvenated by entering into the land of Vietnam, a contemporary reincarnation of the mythic frontier battleground.

Nevertheless, Butler soon introduces a scene in which harsh realities of the war disrupts Clifford's vision, and suggests the impossibility of defining Vietnam in terms of the myth of the frontier and America's good wars. One day in an attempt to rescue a captive comrade who was abducted by local NLF force, Captain Fleming and his team conduct an investigation of a Vietnamese man on suspicion of implication in the kidnapping. The interrogation in which Clifford also participates, however, turns into a torture and finally they accidentally kill the man by drowning him with a wet handkerchief. This event completely inverts the images of innocence, goodness, and redemption that Clifford has identified with American soldiers in Vietnam, and thus he decides to desert the Army and the battlefield.

In this way, Clifford is seriously disillusioned with the military and decides to

desert the battlefield and seek shelter in Saigon's streets. I would argue that Butler attempts to challenge the conventional concepts of war and masculinity that have been reproduced in America's frontier mythology and combat romances, by describing the protagonist who—with the realization that “what [he] wanted so much, what he knew was good, had been perverted that afternoon [i.e. the day when the US soldiers committed the torture]”—rejects the hypocrisy of the US government's/military's exposition of the war and deserts the battlefield (37). Clifford escapes the battlefield; at the same time, he also jettisons the conventional ideals of manhood and heroism that have symbolically been associated with the myth of the frontier and America's good wars.

### **Vietnam as a Garden of Eden versus Alien American Cities**

It is important to note that in denying American masculine/military ideals, Clifford begins to identify himself with the lifestyles and virtues of the Vietnamese people. After abandoning the US military camp and getting settled in Saigon, Clifford's appearance becomes thinner as if he transforms from an American soldier to a Vietnamese man. When Lanh meets Clifford for the first time, therefore, she asks him: “Why are you so skinny? ... You're skinny like a Vietnamese” (9). Clifford describes his own transformation into Vietnamese-like-self as “Vietnamization,” an ironic appropriation of the term that signifies the US policy to withdraw its troops and transfer the responsibility

of the war to the government of South Vietnam carried out under the supervision of Richard Nixon administration (10). Henceforth, until the very last moment of the Fall of Saigon, Clifford seriously devotes himself to adjust to the Vietnamese ways of living. With the help of Lanh, his efforts at “Vietnamization” prove to be largely successful. For even in the midst of the night’s turmoil, Clifford still feels strong attachment to the city and its people: “He want[s] to stay in Saigon. [...]. Saigon [i]s his home now. He f[ee]ls it strongly. He love[s] the city. For its energy. For its life, moment to moment” (70–71). In this way, having deserted the Army and living in Saigon’s street, Clifford seems to desire to become a Vietnamese.

More significantly, the protagonist’s perception of the Vietnamese landscape greatly alters in keeping with his efforts to accommodate to the Vietnamese ways of life. In other words, by forsaking the peculiarly American mythical perspective and wishing to adjust to the local people’s lifestyles, Clifford becomes able to see Vietnam from the Vietnamese people’s viewpoints. In the first place, in contrast to the tradition of American colonial mentality that have, more often than not, neglected the indigenous people’s history of any given Asian countries, the protagonist appreciates the ways in which the Vietnamese people’s history and culture have continued and been recorded in

the landscapes of their homeland.<sup>122</sup> When Clifford tries to explain to himself the reason of his strong attachment to Vietnam and its people, he recalls a lovely, bucolic scenery of villages once he saw:

I passed tiny villages deep under groves of banana and rubber trees, water buffalo lolling in yards like housecats. And ancient tombs, miniature towers and walls of pitted dark stone in the fields, Farmer buried where they toiled—no, I distort in my American way—not toiled. Buried where they lived and worked the earth, now to become part of their field (14).

It should be noted that along with the elements of the beautiful Vietnamese natural world, Clifford takes notice of the record of human history—“ancient tombs”—retained in the field. In contrast to the types of conventional American cultural imagination that tends to erase the history of the indigenous Vietnamese, Clifford acknowledges the villagers’ history that can be traced back to ancient times and loves Vietnam for that very reason. Whereas in images of American cities, which I will later examine, Clifford is disappointed by desolate cityscapes that do not evoke any intimate historical connection with its inhabitants, in Vietnam he is fascinated with the ways in which the land and its people are organically related.

Secondly, Bulter’s depiction of Vietnam quite differs from conventional American representation of Asia and Vietnam in that it extensively describes the city of Saigon, and

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<sup>122</sup> “Americans tend to think of history beginning when Americans enters it. Thus, in the cultural imagination, there is no Japan before Commodore Perry, no Vietnam before the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) parachuted in during the end of World War II.” See Christopher 114.

depicts it as a harmonious society consists of diverse individuals. As in the cases of many canonical American Vietnam War narratives such as Caputo's *A Rumor of War*, Larry Heinemann's *Close Quarters* (1977), John M. Del Vecchio's *The 13th Valley* (1982), and so forth that account the experiences of the war from the GI's viewpoint, US novels and memoirs have mostly taken place in jungle battlefield and seldom depicted cities where non-combatant Vietnamese people lead their daily life. Whilst those American "grunt's eye view" narratives have been regarded by critics as an effective vehicle for conveying experiential realities of infantrymen in the fields, they have in effect served to downplay larger political context of the war and also helped to simplify the country of Vietnam to a primitive, backward society inhabited by uncivilized, treacherous villagers.<sup>123</sup> Besides, as clearly recalled in Sartre's memory of his childhood imagination about China and its people that I examined in the introduction of this thesis, in Western cultures there has undeniably been a certain convention to represent Asian cities and its local inhabitants as dirty, backward, dark, and chaotic.<sup>124</sup> Sartre rebukes preceding French writers of foreign travels such as Pierre Loti (1850–1923) for creating visions of Chinese streets as "swarm[ed]"<sup>125</sup> by chaotic, inhuman mass of people. Early English and American

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<sup>123</sup> Jim Neilson, *Warring Fictions: Cultural Politics and the Vietnam War Narrative* (Jackson, Miss.: University Press of Mississippi, 1998) 6.

<sup>124</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, "From China to Another," *Colonialism and Neocolonialism*, trans. Azzedine Haddour, Steve Brewer, and Terry McWilliams (London and New York: Routledge, 2006) 22–35.

<sup>125</sup> Sartre 28.



protestant missionaries in Far East Asia in the middle and late Nineteenth Century wrote of the Chinese people on the streets as “vile and polluted in a shocking degree” and wallowing in filth.<sup>126</sup> As prominent and erudite writer as Henry Adams is not at all inculpable of this rebuke. When Adams visited Japan with painter John La Farge in July 1886, he wrote to his friend John Hay that he is exasperated by “oily, sickish, slightly fetid odor” that underlay all the things they found in Tokyo.<sup>127</sup> Although this may, to a certain extent, have reflected the inchoate sanitary infrastructures of Japan of that time, Adams’s description of Tokyo’s filthy streets is certainly coloured by his racism with which he asserts that “Japs are monkeys, and the women very badly made monkeys.”<sup>128</sup>

Butler, by making his protagonist transcend the boundary of battlefield and relocate in Saigon, tries to capture images of the Vietnamese city inhabited by living Vietnamese citizens that are different from European and US negative portrayals of Asian cities. During the night of the Fall of Saigon, Clifford recollects a vivid impression of Saigon’s streets when he visited the city for the first time as follows:

The stores and ground floors of houses near and open full on the street like large-mouthed shallow caves. And the people’s lives open too and there on the street, crouching with friends, laughing and eating at sidewalk food stands, and carving wood or tinkering with motorcycle engines or selling cloth, all outside, out under the hot sky and always returning my smile or word (14).

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<sup>126</sup> Colin Mackerras, *Western Images of China* (Hong Kong, Oxford, and New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) 50.

<sup>127</sup> Henry Adams, “To John Hay, 9 July 1886,” *Letters of Henry Adams (1885–1891)* ed. Worthington Chauncey Ford (London: Constable and Company, 1930) 369–372. 369.

<sup>128</sup> Adams, “To John Hay, 22 August 1886,” *Letters* 374–378. 377.

Clifford's perception of Saigon's streets considerably differs from the negative portrayals of filthy, chaotic Asian cities. In the capital of South Vietnam, the local people seem to maintain perfect harmony between people and the land. Unlike American metropolises where Clifford finds people isolated from each other, the citizens of Saigon seem to engage in lively, "intense" interactions with others. The streets are filled with people of all ages and miscellaneous occupations, and are also replete with various goods that they produce and sell. The inundation of the people and things on Saigon's streets almost comes across as lacking a sense of unity and is even chaotic to a stranger's eye. Nonetheless, Clifford finds here a beautiful concord between people, and between mankind and the place. The stores and front doors of houses facing the streets are "open" like "large-mouthed shallow caves" and thus appear to be a part of natural geography (14). Saigon in Butler's novel is also strikingly different from the city of Saigon that fleetingly appears at the beginning of Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) that, with its streets filled with alien people and goods, gives the protagonist a claustrophobic sense of fear. In Butler's Saigon, notwithstanding the streets that literally abound with retailers, their goods, customers, and passers-by, the people's way of life seems "open," and they return Clifford's greetings and smiles and seem to beckon him to take part in their daily interactions (14). In the protagonist's eyes, in this way Saigon appears to be a middle

ground ideally placed in-between civilization and wilderness that retains a perfect balance between energetic commercial activities that define the urbaneness of the country's capital, and sincere, intimate human relationship that he finds in native villages. To Clifford, Vietnamese people seem to lead a "life simply and with joy," and the deserter of the war strongly desires to be a part of the universe (15).

Clifford's positive perception of the land, culture, and people of Vietnam makes a striking contrast with desolate American cityscapes that he encounters in American parts of the novel. By contrast to the bucolic, friendly land/cityscapes of Vietnam, the cities of the United States, even though it is the protagonist's homeland, appears to be utterly alien and offers no geniality to him. While both the agricultural villages and the capital of South Vietnam, in Clifford's eyes, retain a perfect unity between its people, land, and history, American cityscapes seen by the protagonist lack the sense of harmony, and all its components seem to be disjointed and separated from each other. Clifford temporarily returns to the United States for R&R [Rest and Recreation] after 5 months of his service. The protagonist goes to Carmel, San Francisco to meet Francine only to confirm the dissolution of their marriage. It is worth noting in this episode of the protagonist's brief return to the US that, besides the separation from his wife, Clifford feels alienated from the people and cityscape of his homeland, and regards them as being devoid of any sense

of humanity and nature:

The city had seemed all concrete, hard and clean. Alien, after five months in Vietnam. The streets were deserted, to his eye. Even at midday, there was so much space unused by people. Then down the Pacific Coast highway. The trees look sculptured, the hills modeled, the highway was hard and sharp-edged and no one was in the fields, no one was buried there or moved there, It all seemed alien. This was the foreign city to his eye now. (20)

Although Carmel-by-the-Sea is conventionally noted for the natural beauty of its coast and surrounding forest, to Clifford, it seems to lack all the scenic beauties of nature that he find in Vietnamese villages, and thus appears to be “all concrete, hard and clean.” In both Vietnamese cities and villages everyone exchanges friendly greetings. In Carmel, however, there is no one who greets or replies to Clifford, and the streets seem “deserted, to his eye” (20). In Saigon the people’s houses and stores are so accommodated to the land that they almost look like components of natural geography, whereas in Carmel even the elements of nature come across as artificial and false: “The trees loo[k] sculptured, the hill modeled ...” (20). Furthermore, in America the protagonist can by no means find the perfect harmony between people and nature that the Vietnamese villagers have maintained on their native soil. In Vietnam villagers live and work on the earth and, when they die, are buried in their ancestral ground and eventually become unified with nature, whereas in Carmel “no one [is] in the fields, no one was buried there or moved there” (20). Therefore, despite the fact that the United States is his homeland, Clifford

thinks that it lacks all the charms Vietnam possesses and thus Carmel “seem[s] alien” and America “[is] the foreign country to his eye now” (20).

Clifford’s negative impression of American urban cityscape does not change, when he returns to the United States with Lanh in order to escape from the North Vietnamese Army. Upon coming back to America after four and a half years of exile as a deserter, Clifford has to temporarily separate from Lanh, and stay in San Francisco in order to seek support from the people of *Free West*, a group of left-wing social activists, whom he was once acquainted with in Vietnam. While waiting for a counterfeit ID and looking for a contact from Lanh, Clifford roams about the city and perceives the cityscape of San Francisco as follows:

Burning—rope and metal—a burning smell as the cable car gripped its way down the hill. Ahead, dark water was littered with lights and Cliff watched the bay windows passing—TV screens flickering, lamps and chairs, half-drained glasses, parts of bodies—the side of a face, shoulder, arm, a back, legs propped. (150)

Clifford is now on a cable car to reach the beach, and he feels as if the smell of the urban pollution—burning rope and metal of the cable car—wafts all over the city. The illumination of the city lights reflected upon the sea does not please the protagonist’s eyes, but instead it is also described in terms of urban pollution, as being “littered” on the sea. Moreover, in sharp contrast to the Vietnamese agricultural landscape in which every element of human civilization and nature seems to be intimately related, San Francisco

appears to disjoin all the components of its cityscape. Even the parts of a human body—the side of a face, shoulder, arm, a back, and legs—seem to lack the organic unity they originally have to possess. They instead appear to be incoherently scattered in the room, just as the miscellaneous items—TV screens, lamps, chairs and etcetera—seem to be littered on the floor. In this way, by comparing the landscapes of Vietnam and the United States, Butler delineates the deserter-protagonist's rejection of the excessively modernized contemporary American society and his empathy for the simpler, anti-modern Vietnamese ways of life.

### **Contemporary American Pastoral: the Feminized Land of Vietnam**

In *The Alleys of Eden* Butler attempts to make his protagonist reject conventional American ideas about masculinity and military heroism as well as the concept of America's good wars, by having him desert the frontier-like battleground and empathize with the Vietnamese people. Butler's critique of the myth of the frontier and dominant US representations of Vietnam is, however, more complex. As I have already examined, Clifford's observation of Vietnamese villages and Saigon's cityscape is sympathetic and in many ways different from both the Western negative representation of Asia and the vision of Vietnam as an extension of the Indian War battlefield. Nevertheless, I would suggest that the protagonist's relationship with America's national creation myth is twofold, and he still sees Vietnam in terms of the frontier. That is, on one hand, Clifford

attempts to reject conventional American ideas about manhood and heroism joined to the images of Indian War frontier by running away from the Vietnamese warzone. On the other hand, however, the protagonist still interprets Vietnam within the larger framework of the frontier mythology: his euphoric view of Vietnam and his fascination with the Vietnamese people's ways of life are in fact a manifestation of his desire to see Vietnam as a pre-modern, Edenic garden, an update of American pastoral. In other words, instead of defining Vietnam as an extension of the Wild West, Clifford envisions the uncivilized, bucolic landscape of Vietnam as an oriental version of American agricultural frontier. Clifford acknowledges and appreciates the history of Vietnamese peasants in the fields, because the anti-modern Vietnamese ways of life brings him back to the "time free," uncivilized landscape of American frontier garden that erases/forgives his past failures. Further to this point, like preceding writers of American pastoral, the protagonist genders Vietnam as a land and people essentially feminine that welcomes/needs American males' exploitation and support.

Like the earlier American writers such as Brown, Cooper and others, whom Lewis examines in *The American Adam*, Clifford perceives life in urban cities in the US as corrupted, with people alienated from each other. It should be noted that both of the American cities that Clifford explores—Carmel and San Francisco—are located in the

westernmost part of the continent, and therefore evoke the fact of the official closure of the frontier about a century ago. As the terminal points of the westward migration, the cities also represent a terminus of modern American machine civilization. In America, the once fertile land of the New World has completely been exploited and replaced with ugly, artificial, concrete buildings and asphalted highways, and there is nothing that reminds the protagonists of the experiences of mythic pioneers.

On the other hand, Vietnam—like the uncivilized frontier settings in preceding American writers' romances—is described as an ideally anti-modern landscape where the protagonist can escape from the corruption/pollution of cities as well as the memory of the disillusioning experiences of the past: the failure in marriage and friendship. Placed in the uncivilized Vietnamese landscape that has not been defiled by the machines of overripe, decadent Euro-American cities, Clifford can be reincarnated as an innocent new individual who has no history. Concerning this, it is worth noting that, as I have already suggested above, Clifford feels as if he goes back to infancy when he arrives in the early days of his service in Vietnam. As young Natty Bumppo, alias Deerslayer, is figuratively reborn afresh in the wood when he fights and kills an Iroquois warrior and is given a new name, Hawkeye, by the dying Indian, Clifford and his comrades rejuvenate



in the untamed tropical environment and in their battle against the Vietnamese foe.<sup>129</sup>

However, the seeming innocence of the protagonist and his fellow GIs is soon sullied by their involvement in the torture of a Vietnamese. Disillusioned with the Army, Clifford deserts the battlefield and takes refuge in Saigon. It should be pointed out here that the idea of American hero as an innocent individual still haunts Clifford after the desertion. I would argue that, in lieu of the Army, the deserter finds the pre-modern, bucolic Vietnamese society, and appreciates it as an Edenic garden where men can once again get back to their figuratively infantile, unsullied state and realize intimate, filial relationship with fellow inhabitants. In this, Clifford conceives the Vietnamese villages as an update of mythic agricultural frontier, and he regards the city of Saigon as what Leo Marx calls “middle landscape,” the ideal setting of American pastoral, which is located “in a middle ground somewhere ‘between,’ yet in a transcendent relation to the opposing forces of civilization and nature.”<sup>130</sup> That is, in the hero’s eyes Saigon appears to be an ideal habitat that maintains a perfect balance between the energy and virtues of primitive agrarian society and the convenience of modern civilization, wherein he can sympathize with innocent, noble savages while still retaining his American character.

The title of the novel that signifies Saigon’s streets where the protagonist and the heroin

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<sup>129</sup> Lewis 104.

<sup>130</sup> Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and Pastoral Ideal in America* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) 23.

live—*The Alleys of Eden*—is also suggestive of the deserter-protagonist's desire to regard Vietnam as an Adamic frontier landscape. When Clifford identifies himself with the Vietnamese people and their way of living—the close relationship with the land as well as the way the people are intimately connected with each other—he in effect sympathizes with the image of innocence that the garden-like, pre-modern agricultural Vietnamese society evokes, and that lets him forget, if not absolve him of, the sin of the torture.

To some extent, this reflects the reality of the war, wherein the young Americans' lives were unjustifiably expended by the politicians' and the military authorities' fallacious decisions. Throughout recorded history young people have always fought in wars; however, U.S. troops in Vietnam were, on average, the youngest men ever to fight in a war that America had been engaged in. While in the Second World War the average American soldiers were twenty-six years old, during the Vietnam War, by contrast, the majority of volunteers and draftees were teenagers and their average age was nineteen.<sup>131</sup> Although in November 1965 the Pentagon decreed that all the GIs must be eighteen before being assigned to the warzones, the average age of the infantrymen remained low, and considering the fact that until 1971 the voting age was not dropped from twenty–

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<sup>131</sup> During the Vietnam War, young men could join or be drafted into the army at the age of eighteen, and boys could be enrolled in the Marine Corps at seventeen on the condition of a guardian's consent. See Appy 27.

one to eighteen, most of the Americans who were sent to fight in Vietnam did not even have the right to vote.<sup>132</sup> Therefore, even though many American boys of the 1960's were ordered by the authorities to fight in the foreign battlefield and sometimes lost their lives or were maimed for life, they did not even have a means to reflect their dissent or anger in the sphere of national politics.

Nevertheless, the victimhood of American soldiers is also closely related to the dilemma that the Vietnam-vet writers encounter when they recount their war experiences. That is, while the representation of the GIs as innocent boys deceived by the authorities/adults certainly helps to formulate a convincing critique of the fallacies on the part of US military and political authorities, too much emphasis on it can serve as a justification for the acts of violence that the US military forces perpetrated in Vietnam, and tends to make the Vietnamese people's loss and suffering invisible.

It is also worth noting that Clifford's sympathy for Vietnam is closely associated with the framework of an American literary tradition of pastoral writings that genders the frontier landscape as feminine. Furthermore, as I will demonstrate shortly, Clifford's wish to identify Vietnam with the imagery of woman, specifically his Vietnamese lover Lanh, is related to his desire to justify himself as an innocent American man whose youth was wasted in the war. Annette Kolodny argues that the earliest European immigrant

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<sup>132</sup> Appy 27.

authors figured the untamed environment of the new continent as an essentially feminine land that allows the settlers to exploit her bountiful natural resources and fertility. Embraced in the bosom of generous Mother Nature, the settlers were thought to rejuvenate as innocent, primitive “yeomen” who shed off the ennui of the decadent European civilization, and who established an Edenic garden/society based on the filial intimacy of the members that had never come into being in the Old World. Since then, the vision of the American natural landscape as essentially feminine has become a central metaphor for generations of American writers and thinkers either in urging further exploitation of the land or in expressing their concerns for the natural environment.<sup>133</sup>

That is, the advocates of land development, for instance, have regarded the land as a female seducer that invites her lover to make use of her abundant natural resources, whereas naturalists and nature conservationists have often evoked a vision of the uncivilized land as a virgin who faces the danger of losing her purity because of some rapacious developers’ attempts to violate her. In either cases and in numerous other occasions, the metaphor of the land as female has been deployed by diverse groups of writers to express the interest and values of their own standpoints; and since the aesthetics of gendered landscape are closely associated with the history and the myth of

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<sup>133</sup> Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975).

the frontier, it has remained a compelling trope that strikes a chord in Americans' heart.

Likewise, Clifford also figures the Vietnamese land as an essentially feminine landscape that embraces him as an innocent hero who has no past. In the first place, Lanh, the protagonist's Vietnamese lover, serves as a medium that relates the American deserter to the people and the land of Vietnam. When Clifford meets Lanh for the first time, he confesses his involvement in the torture of the Vietcong suspect, but Lanh forgives him for all what he did and thus helps him to relieve, if temporarily, his sense of guilt. Thus by living with Lanh, Clifford manages to believe that he is being accepted in the Vietnamese community in Saigon, and continue living there until the very night of the fall Saigon in April 1975, when all the rest of Americans living in the capital of the South Vietnam have fled to the United States. Even though Clifford is highly skilled in the command of Vietnamese language, it is through Lanh's almost unconditional love for him that the American deserter can feel as if he is integrated into the life of the Vietnamese people.

The following scene is particularly important to note in considering Clifford's relationship with Vietnam and its people. For in this scene of the protagonist's and the heroine's sexual intercourse Clifford clearly identifies his Vietnamese lover with the fertile land of Vietnam that he inhabits:

They [Clifford and Lanh] said nothing that afternoon but pressed their faces

deep into each other's crotch their mouth swarming at each other for a long time longer than ever before devouring each other till they could not breathe ... then they joined each other and lay still, clamped tight face to face, chest to chest, gut to gut, and Lanh came again and again until at last she began to weep softly against his neck and he came, but held back his own tears. —Why are you crying? he whispered./ —I love you, she said./ *I could live in you, he said, his penis still inside her.*—*Stay. Yes, she said.* (60, emphases added)

Immediately before this scene, Clifford is in a great distress, because he has found the news of the US's decision to completely withdraw its military forces from Vietnam.

Although since the desertion he has rejected “the life and values”<sup>134</sup> of the United States and been determined to live in the streets of Saigon as a non-combatant citizen, the news profoundly disturbs Clifford, because it compels him to face the reality of life as an exile in a foreign land. For all his fascination with and admiration for the Vietnamese ways of living, Clifford's unstable status as an American refugee does not allow him to completely become integrated into the local community. Hence, when confronted by the fact that he may never be able to return to the Army/the United States, and that the state of exile in the foreign land might become his permanent reality, Clifford is dismayed and feels as if “the original meaning of all this [deserting the Army and living in Saigon as a sympathizer of Vietnamese] ha[s] gradually worn off” (59). Nevertheless, after engaging in the prolonged and passionate acts of lovemaking with his Vietnamese lover quoted above, Clifford finds that her soothing embrace restores his “Love for Saigon”(60). In

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<sup>134</sup> Butler 59.

this brief episode, Butler in fact describes Clifford's and Lanh's relationship in such a way that the Vietnamese female body serves as a shelter or cocoon that protects the American deserter from the menaces of the foreign land. The Vietnamese lover, thus identified with the mythic imagery of the New World garden where men can cast away the past and be reborn as new innocent individuals, helps the protagonist to leave behind all the past experiences related to America, including the war crime he committed with his comrades. In other words, by associating Lanh with the land of Vietnam, Clifford's desires to regard himself as an innocent individual whose sin is absolved by the her unconditional love.

### **Pastoral Undone**

In this way, Butler, like many other American writers of the Vietnam War, certainly resorts to the framework of traditional US frontier narratives in describing the land and people of Vietnam. However, I would argue that Butler's greatest artistic strength exactly lies in the ways he undoes these conventional visions and brings us to more multifaceted realities of the war and Vietnam. In these revelatory scenes wherein Butler undermines Clifford's vision of Vietnam as an oriental pastoral, the author also subverts the myth of innocent American Adam that his protagonist seems to identify himself with. The two significant moments in the novel that I will examine below will demonstrate Butler's attempts to resist the US ethnocentric concepts of Vietnam and the myth of American

exceptionalism.

The first of the two takes place in the last days of Clifford's exile in Saigon, when he begins to notice the dissonance in the harmony of Vietnamese lives. Saigon's cityscape, in which he lives, is no longer a simple, utopia-like pastoral, but it then starts to show the cracks and scars that have been brought about by the Vietnamese people's prolonged battles against successive foreign imperial forces. One day Clifford purposelessly walks along an arcade located in the centre of the city, worrying about the prospect of the imminent North Vietnamese Army's incursion. It is Sunday morning and the city at the first sight looks as idyllic as it always does. Saigon is still in its drowsy mood and is awaiting the day's energetic activities to start once again. Clifford sees a young couple walk along the arcade "in the shade and in their love" (71). Whereupon he hears a faint melody of some traditional Vietnamese music from a little afar "whining and thumping like an Ozark hoedown" (71). Thus associating a Vietnamese classical tune with American western music, Clifford apparently identifies Vietnam with American frontier setting. As usual, the people on the market are engaging in their own businesses, and yet retain a perfect harmony between themselves for all the diversity of their activities. The first half of this scene, which begins with the faint "whining and thumping," is depicted as though every person on the arcade is playing his or her own



instrument and contributes to render one larger piece of music.

And peddler sounds. Scissors snapping from the woman with a pan of nougats, an old man clacking bamboo sticks before his spread of fruit, a woman carrying baskets of steaming rice at the opposite ends of a long pole balanced on her shoulder and twirling a little drum chattering from a pair of balls dancing against it on strings. (71)

In the background the melody of the traditional music continues, and the repetition of the percussive onomatopoeias—“snapping, clacking, and chattering”—makes the scene as if the people are playing different kinds of drums by making use of their own tools, and altogether they seem to be rendering an enchanting, polyrhythmic piece of music. Hence Clifford is “entranced” (71). Clifford’s euphoria, however, is disrupted, when he stumbles upon a leper. The man’s face is terribly deformed by the disease and he is “not in the arcade” (71). Although Clifford tries to “keep his mind on the arcade” (’71), after the encounter, he cannot help noticing the people and the things that are “not in the arcade.” That is, till then the protagonist has censored threatening elements of the city from his vision, by domesticating Vietnam as an extension of American pastoral landscape. However, the unexpected intrusion of the leper now undermines Clifford’s illusion and forces him to recognize the dissonance in the music, the realities of Vietnam and the war that contradict American imaginative geography. Clifford sees “a tiny boy cra[b] by, his stunted legs twisted beneath him, begging with an upward Army bush cap” (71). He can smell human flesh burning just a block away (71). Just a moment before

Clifford was in a state of euphoria, engrossed by the rhythm and the harmony of the exotic music; however, he is now plunged into a bottomless pit, shocked by the scenes of war destructions which he once took part in. Those scars he finds in the city are, after all, the consequence of the chronic poverty, confusion, and violence brought about by the long history of domination by foreign imperial forces. The United States is the latest of those intruders, who has now divided the country into the two feuding states. Moreover, Clifford realizes that, despite his wish to be reborn as an innocent, new individual, he is after all a part of the foreign imperial power that is to blame. Thus, Clifford speaks to himself: "We [are] the predators. We who came from outside" (72).

The second example located in the very last part of the novel re-enacts the earlier scene in which Clifford identifies Lanh with the land of Vietnam. However, by contrast to the preceding scene that I have already examined above, this episode completely undermines the protagonist's attempt to domesticate/feminize Vietnam. After relocating in the United States Clifford and Lanh settle in a suburban small town in Illinois. In the course of time, however, Clifford feels as if his love for Lanh and Vietnam becomes gradually but undeniably enfeebled; and interestingly the protagonist's detachment from his lover and Vietnam is represented by his impotence. Having realized his own inability to love Lanh as well as his alienation from Vietnam, Clifford leaves the heroine for a

time to drift around the States only to feel a more acute sense of isolation in the USA. Presently he comes back to Lanh's place one last time in an attempt to restore his relationship with her. Although he is as impotent at the beginning, now he senses "a brief smell of earth" outside their apartment that reminds him of the soil of the agricultural Vietnamese landscape, and this makes him see a "vision" of Vietnam that arouses his sexual desire as well as spiritual affection for Lanh:

He had a vision of Vietnam. A flash of sunlight in his first moments of flight, the sun flaring from a pond, a water buffalo beyond, a palm frond, an empty sky, the heat, he felt them all again now, he lay down on the bed, held Lanh; and he swelled with the countryside, with the sprawl of the city, Saigon, their race through the alleyways, he wanted to go back, go back to their alley room, that was their place, *Lanh had made him love the very smell of the air, the very heat that beat down the stone walls. This was why his penis rose now, why he pressed against her with a low cry, his breath twisted tight in his chest. In her body he was Vietnamese [...]* . (247, emphasis added)

It should be noted that being in a state of rapture Clifford clearly identifies Lanh with the fertile land of Vietnam, and for that very reason his attachment to her is now being restored. In the eyes of the protagonist, the Vietnamese heroine is not only an amorous lover, but also a generous, forgiving mother who provides him with a shelter and nourishment, and that both of her roles are related to the images of the gendered frontier landscape reproduced throughout American literary history. With her mother-like, almost unlimited generosity toward the hero, Lanh accepts Clifford and the acts of violence that he has perpetrated in Vietnam. Likewise, the Vietnamese garden associated with Lanh

erases the protagonist's past failures, and—by transforming him from an ex-American soldier to a Vietnamese, or a “human” who transcends of all the trivial concerns about nationality and “is connected to a woman only”—relieves him of the excruciating sense of guilt.

However, as in the scene of Saigon's arcade analysed above, some intrusive noises from outside disrupt Clifford's wishful vision. In the midst of their intercourse Clifford hears “a car horn bark in the street” and “the refrigerator grinding away” (249). Although he tries to dismiss them as merely trivial things that mean nothing for his earnest wish to become a Vietnamese, the sounds of American machines nonetheless remind him of his US lineage, for “they [are] the things that [are] imprinted in him—the synapses of culture” (249). Thus, gradually Clifford's vision of himself as a Vietnamese living in the feminized Vietnamese land collapses. The deserter once again turns into “an American soldier” and Lanh a Vietnamese “bargirl,” “a tiny little woman” whom he bought in order to enjoy “an encounter with the Orient,” and use her as “a scale against his virility” (250). In this way, Butler undermines Clifford's pastoral vision of Vietnam. In so doing, he reveals and ultimately subverts the protagonist's desire to preserve his innocence—an egocentric hope that stems from the images of goodness and innocence that the United States has identified itself with since its inception. The protagonist eventually realizes

that he “bribed” her “with an apple”—the lures of American wealth and power—so that he can establish a separate peace in which all the failures of his past are erased and forgiven (250).

I would contend that Clifford finally breaks up with Lanh and leaves her to the cares of the Bins—a South Vietnamese family who have migrated to the same Illinois town—for he cannot love her when she has lost the characteristics of the generous Mother Earth that helps him to forget his sense of guilt. While in Vietnam Lanh used to be a “strong woman,”<sup>135</sup> who sheltered Clifford from threatening forces that are “not in the arcade,”<sup>136</sup> in the US, however, she is reduced to a vulnerable and helpless existence who cannot even fulfil the easiest of daily chores because of the difficulties she find in adapting different language and culture. Lanh herself is frustrated by the fact and desperately complains to Clifford: “I am a child here” (163). In this way, the Vietnamese heroin transforms from a mother-like, strong, and generous lover to a powerless refugee. In other words, rooted from its native soil and transplanted in an alien land, she is no longer able to act as an embodiment of the Edenic Vietnamese garden who helps Clifford to purge himself of his sin. Then, for Clifford, to confront Lanh deprived of her Mother Earth character is once again to confront his own guilt, exactly because the predicament

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<sup>135</sup> Butler 123.

<sup>136</sup> Butler 71.

of Lanh and other Vietnamese refugees whom he has met America has been brought about by the acts of violence that he himself once participated in. Unable to face the excruciating fact, Clifford leaves Lanh and heads for Canada, very likely in search of another Garden of Eden that will help him forget his past once again. In the protagonist's ultimate decision to desert his Vietnamese lover, Butler thus represents the gravity of the ex-soldier's trauma and remorse that he can hardly reconcile with. At the same time, by undoing Clifford's wishful vision, the Vietnam-vet writer also criticizes the self-righteous and egotistic tendencies that underlie American imaginative geography to define Vietnam as an oriental extension of the mythic frontier.

## Chapter Four: Walking Away from Tarzan Country and Entering into the Thoreauvian Woods: Tim O'Brien's Two Desertion Narratives: *Going After Cacciato* and "On the Rainy River"

### Runaways from Tarzan Country: *Going After Cacciato*

In the beginning of the GIs' magical journey to Paris taking place in Tim O'Brien's second novel *Going After Cacciato* (1978), one of the protagonist's comrades utters a remark that implies O'Brien's challenges to hegemonic American ideas about war and masculinity developed throughout the entire plot of the novel. When Cacciato, an "[o]pen-faced and naïve and plump" soldier whom Berlin describes as retaining "a strange, boyish simplicity,"<sup>137</sup> has gone AWOL [Absent Without Leave], declaring a personal ceasefire and embarking upon a seemingly impossible journey from Vietnam to Paris, the protagonist and his fellow GIs of Third Squad begin to pursue the deserter. Following Cacciato's westward migration, the GIs leave Vietnamese heavy combat zones and step into a relatively calm mountainous area of the country:

They were in the high country. Clean, high, unpolluted country. Complex country, mountains growing out of hills, valleys dropping from mountains and then sharply climbing to higher mountains. It was country far from the war, rich and peaceful country with trees and thick grass, vines and wet thickets and clean air. Tarzan country, Eddie Lazzutti called it. Grinning, thumping his bare chest, Eddie would howl and yodel. (16)

In the scene above, Eddie Lazzuti's remark that Vietnam is "Tarzan country" is especially worth noting, for, in the figure of the one of the most famous heroes of US

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<sup>137</sup> Tim O'Brien, *Going After Cacciato* (New York: Broadway Books, 1999) 8.

youth culture, O'Brien locates a dominant American discourse about the ideal manhood whose legitimacy he sharply questions. This analogy, to some extent, admittedly comes from the seeming similarities between the image of Tarzan's African jungle and the Vietnamese tropical natural world: both stories take place in a remote rainforest replete with "trees, thick grass, vines and wet thickets." Furthermore, the GIs are now walking away from perilous combat zones; therefore, a sense of security coming from the fact may well let Lazzutti fully appreciate the picturesque beauty of the land, and he utters it half in jest and half in awe of the foreign landscape, kinds of which, before coming to Vietnam, he must have seen merely in movies or on Television. Nevertheless, Lazzutti's remark also suggests the existence of a peculiar ideological formula that frames Americans' perception of a foreign land and culture.

Since the publication of the first novel of the series, *Tarzan of the Apes* (1914), the stories of Tarzan—originally a creation of American pulp fiction writer Edgar Rice Burroughs—have been reproduced in various media as one of the most popular adventure tales for American youth. Narrating the violent adventures and chivalrous romance of the eponymous white protagonist reared by Kala, a female ape who lost her own baby, in African jungle, Tarzan stories are typical of what Kenneth Kidd calls "*the feral tale*, a narrative form derived from mythology and folklore that dramatizes the



‘wildness’ of boys.”<sup>138</sup> Although the feral tale is a transcultural phenomenon that can be found in various regions other than the United States, Kidd contends that its US versions have formed a hegemonic discourse that has played a central role in the formation of American boyhood in the twentieth-century. According to Kidd, the moral message that the audience/reader receive from the feral tale is an ideal model for American boys’ passage to manhood, since it enacts “the white, middle-class male’s perilous passage from nature to culture, from bestiality to humanity, from homosocial pack life to individual self-reliance and heterosexual prowess—that is, from boyhood to manhood.”<sup>139</sup> In other words, it is a strong ideological formula that works to exclude/discriminate the gender/class/racial/sexual minorities who do not belong to the dominant group—white, middle class, athletic, heterosexual males—that it approves. Likewise, Tarzan represents “an impossible ideal of American masculinity and its racist, imperialistic, classist underpinnings that sometimes go unmarked: he is aristocratic yet not effete, savage but not barbaric, wild but not native, and civilized but not feminized.”<sup>140</sup> As Wannamaker maintains, although the “overtly racist, imperialistic,

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<sup>138</sup> Kenneth B. Kidd, *Making American Boys: Boyology and the Feral Tale* (Minneapolis, MN: the University of Minnesota Press, 2004) 1.

<sup>139</sup> Kidd 7.

<sup>140</sup> Annette Wannamaker, *Boys in Children’s Literature and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2008) 38.

social–Darwinist”<sup>141</sup> messages of Burroughs’s original text have undergone considerable modifications in its later adaptations, all the Tarzan stories—including Johnny Weissmuller’s iconic film series as well as Disney’s animated cartoon produced in 1999—nevertheless impart the moral lessons that the feral tale has conventionally offered.<sup>142</sup>

It should be pointed out that there are striking similarities between Tarzan’s feral tale and the stories of gallant soldiers/gunmen that abound in the myth of the frontier. Especially, the characteristics of Tarzan that have made him America’s most popular feral boy have much in common with those of the frontier ranger-type warriors. First of all, both the feral hero and American rangers are imagined to be distinct from and stronger than effeminate Europeans corrupted by modern civilization. Tarzan is brought up by apes in the wild African jungle, and thus has attained great, almost bestial, physical abilities to hunt and kill that his foils can never obtain: Burroughs describes Tarzan’s robust physique and gallantry in ways that make a striking contrast with the weakness of his cousin Clayton, noble but powerless English man.<sup>143</sup> Likewise, American rangers are thought to excel “regular” Army or their British or European counterparts, since the frontier fighters developed distinctly rugged physique and acquired a strong, aggressive spirit through their contact as well as conflict with Native Americans in the primitive

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<sup>141</sup> Wannamaker 38.

<sup>142</sup> Wannamaker 37–38, and 58–66.

<sup>143</sup> Wannamaker 55.

environment of the West. Richard Slotkin argues that “the ranger mystique”—the myth of frontier rangers who acquired the strength and guerrilla tactics of their perennial enemy, Native Americans—has been central in the construction of US Army’s institutional identity, since the legend enabled it to distinguish itself from its European counterparts, while providing itself with a symbolical authority as the country’s legitimate force.<sup>144</sup> According to Slotkin, “[b]y dressing and fighting as Indians, the ranger appropriated the savage’s power and American nativity for himself and turned it against both savage and redcoat.”<sup>145</sup> It is also worth noting that in the formative years of US counterinsurgency doctrine (1956–60), military planners organized Army Special Forces or “Green Berets” as specialists of unconventional warfare in post-colonial setting, by extensively deriving its styles and tactics of guerrilla campaign from the ranger commando tradition.<sup>146</sup> At the same time, although both Tarzan and American soldiers appropriate the power of natives or beasts, they are conceived to be different from, and superior to the “barbaric” forces. Tarzan, alias lord Graystoke, is a son of British aristocrat John Clayton and his wife Alice, and his name means “White Skin”<sup>147</sup> in the language of Apes. By that means, Tarzan is always described as possessing

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<sup>144</sup> Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America* (Norman, Oklahoma: the University of Oklahoma Press, 1998) 453–55.

<sup>145</sup> Slotkin 455.

<sup>146</sup> Slotkin 453–55.

<sup>147</sup> Edgar Rice Burroughs, *Tarzan of the Apes* (New York: Modern Library, 2003) 38.

“genetically superior” abilities than both apes and the indigenous Africans: with his great physical strength, the feral boy soon becomes the lord of apes, but his chivalric morality and intelligence make a striking contrast with both cruel, voluptuous apes and cannibalistic, superstitious Africans imagined by Burroughs.<sup>148</sup> In like manner, the images of American soldiers are clearly distinguished from “ignorant” natives who are considered to be living outside civilization. For instance, in the introductory part of *The Green Beret*, Robin Moore describes members of Army Special Force as tough warriors, the legitimate descendants of the mythic frontier rangers, who excel especially in primitive, hand-to-hand fighting. Simultaneously, Moore does not fail to explain that Green Berets are also skilled in the use of latest technologies such as engineering, medicine, and heavy-weapons, and therefore are different from the local people who “have never seen anything more modern than a crossbow.”<sup>149</sup>

In these ways, there are striking similarities between Tarzan’s feral tale and the myth of frontier warriors. Moreover, as the conventional images of rangers who become “real” American fighters in the uncivilized frontier especially fit into the second category of “three overlapping types of feral subjects in oral and written [feral tale] narratives” that Kidd explains—“those fostered by wild animals, those living outside of civilization,

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<sup>148</sup> Wannamaker 47–53.

<sup>149</sup> Robin Moore, *The Green Berets* (New York: Avon Books, 1965) 17.

and those living in confinement within its borders”<sup>150</sup>—we might as well assert that the ranger mystique is a variation of the feral tale, and thus contains the same kinds of imperial, racist messages inscribed in Tarzan’s tales. Lazzuti figures Vietnam in terms of typical American heroic fantasy. This seems to be a small, carefree joke of the character that may well be dismissed soon from the minds of both the GIs and readers. However, I would argue that, by making Lazzutti utter the remark, O’Brien implies the persistence of particular American imaginative geography that frames the GIs’ perception of the land and people of Vietnam, and that also imposes the conventional role of heroic warriors upon American youth. In other words, Lazzutti and his fellow comrades have internalized the discourse of the feral tale/the frontier myth that pervades the Vietnam generation GIs’ mind as an authentic model for their behaviour in the warzone, or reference point of sorts by which they measure the legitimacy of their actions. In so doing, they understand US military’s actions in the Vietnam War in close association with the conventional tales of masculine heroes fighting in a frontier-like uncivilized setting. Therefore, when O’Brien’s character regards the foreign Vietnamese terrain as Tarzan country, he in effect projects an image of the mythic Indian War battlefield onto Vietnam in that he imagines it to be a space where American males are expected to demonstrate their feral manhood by bravely fighting off “barbaric” Vietnamese foes.

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<sup>150</sup> Kidd 3.

While American politicians, military authorities and media described Vietnam in terms of the frontier mythology and impose the epithet of “Indian Country” on Vietnam, the GIs of O’Brien’s generation—the baby boomers—who grew up in the midst of the post Second World War affluence and the inundation of the popular culture more aptly regard Vietnam as “Tarzan Country.”

Nevertheless, in their Pursuit of Cacciato, the deserter, Paul Berlin and his comrades find themselves going AWOL, becoming deserters from “Tarzan Country.” Thus, I would maintain that by describing the group of GIs who escape from the battlefield, O’Brien attempts to undermine the ways in which the discourse of the feral tale/the frontier myth works to impose conventional concepts of courage and heroism upon American youth.

Carrying on the proposition that I have established in the previous chapter—narratives of American deserters potentially undermine conventional US ideas about manhood and heroism as well as America’s imaginative geography of Vietnam as an extension of Indian War battlefield—in this chapter, I will closely read two Vietnam desertion narratives written by O’Brien—*Going After Cacciato* and “On the Rainy River” (1990)—and discuss the ways in which the Vietnam-vet author tries to challenge the legacy of America’s most persistent myth. In so doing, I will especially compare the

images of American frontier landscapes described in each work, and examine the vicissitude of O'Brien's attitude towards the mythic frontier—landscapes of the deep pristine woods that have traditionally been considered to be an essentially American geography and the birth place of the nation's exceptionally democratic, egalitarian, and righteous characteristics. For I would argue that, in these two temporally separate but thematically related works, O'Brien tries to describes the traumatic impact of the war that led many US citizens—both Vietnam combat veterans and non-veterans—to suffer profound post-war disillusionment with the long-held ideals of their own country through the protagonists' experiences in American frontier landscapes.

Without doubt Tim O'Brien has been regarded as one of the most acclaimed American authors to write about the Vietnam War. After the publication of his first book *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* (1973)—a memoir about his own tour of duty taking place between 1969 and 1970—O'Brien has merged his personal experience with literary imagination to create works of fiction whose plots centre around the ordeals and the memories of the people who were, in various ways, involved in the war. Whilst, with a few exceptions such as Philip Caputo, Stephen Wright, Robert Olen Butler, and Tobias Wolfe, many Vietnam-vet writers finished their short literary career after writing one or two memoirs/novels, O'Brien has constantly

produced novels and short stories and succeeded in obtaining both an extensive readership and critical acclaim, from his first novel *Northern Lights* (1975) to his latest novel *July July* (2002). In particular, his second novel, *Going After Cacciato*, which won the National Book Award in 1979, helped make O'Brien one of the most important writers arising from the aftermath of the Vietnam War. Even though it was not an immediate commercial success when the book was published, it nevertheless received favourable reviews by notable critics and writers. Immediately after the novel's publication, John Updike praised *Going After Cacciato* as "reaching for a masterpiece."<sup>151</sup> Ever since, along with Michael Herr's *Dispatches* and Caputo's *A Rumor of War*, and a few others that were published between the late '70s and the early '80s, *Going After Cacciato* has been considered to be a work of American Vietnam Literature garnering well-nigh canonical status: the fiction judges of the National Book Award—Alison Lurie, Mary Lee Settle, and Wallace Stegner—stated that "His [O'Brien's] irony recalls that of Stendhal, his landscape have the breadth and scope of Tolstoy's and the essential American wonder and innocence of his vision deserve to stand beside that of Stephen Crane."<sup>152</sup> As such, the novel has been mentioned in almost

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<sup>151</sup> John Updike, "Layers of Ambiguity," rev. of Don DeLillo's *Players* and Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato*, *The New Yorker* 27 March 1978: 127–133. 130.

<sup>152</sup> Quoted in "Tim O'Brien," *Dictionary of Literary Biography Documentary Series Vol. 9: American Writers of the Vietnam War* (Detroit and London: Gale Research, 1991) 137–214. 151.



every book-length study of the genre.

*Going After Cacciato* narrates GI characters' escape from the Vietnamese warzone to Paris that Paul Berlin, the protagonist, supposedly fantasizes during his night shift lookout on the top of US Army observatory tower in Quang Ngai province, Vietnam. Unfolding three spatially and temporally separate narratives in parallel—the present time: Berlin's lookout duty on the tower; the past: the incidents of the death of Berlin's comrades; and the fantasy: the GIs' journey to Paris—that often intermingle with each other, O'Brien recounts the story of the GIs who desperately seek a way out from the horrifying reality of the war as well as from the ruthless forces of society that compel them to fight in the battlefield.

One of the most cogent artistic achievements of Robert Olen Butler's Vietnam desertion narrative is its deep insight into the suffering and tribulation of the Vietnamese people whose fates have irrevocably been affected by the war. In O'Brien's case, however, despite a cast of several Vietnamese characters appearing in the novel, the author apparently does not succeed in creating *dramatis personae* who break the fetters of Asian stereotypes. In discussing the role of Sarking Aung Wan, a “[p]art Chinese, part unknown”<sup>153</sup> Vietnamese refugee girl, who has fled from Cholon—her home in South Vietnam—which has turned into a heavy combat zone, and who becomes Berlin's

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<sup>153</sup> Tim O'Brien, *Going After Cacciato* 53.

paramour and joins the US squad's journey to Paris, both Kali Tal and John Hellmann suggest that she is the protagonist's projection of his own desire to leave the war, rather than being an independent character that possesses its own distinct perspective.<sup>154</sup> It should be noted that both scholars discuss the character of Wan as being Berlin's alter ego in rather positive ways. Especially, Tal—by referring to Eric Leed's theory that war brings about “crossing and recrossing boundaries of perception, creating confusion with [and] the destruction of natural, rational categories”—argues that O'Brien “struggles, through Berlin, to lift himself out of the confines of the traditional masculine romance” by merging the “masculine” American character and the “feminine” Vietnamese character.<sup>155</sup> That is, Wan is Berlin's “feminine” half that represents a possibility of making him transcend the conventions of combat narratives that often eulogize violent subjugation of other/enemy. Berlin himself, in turn, represents his loyalty to the traditions of the male-dominant society that the GIs belong to. Although by the end of the novel the protagonist fails to reconcile his “masculine” perspective with Wan's plea for ceasefire and conforms to “the traditional myth of male romance,” Tal asserts that the real hero of the novel, if doomed to failure, is Wan, a creature of Berlin's imagination,

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<sup>154</sup> John Hellmann, *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986) 167. Kali Tal, “The Mind at War: Images of Women in Vietnam Novels by Combat Veterans,” *Contemporary Literature* Vol.31, No.1 (Spring, 1990): 76–96.

<sup>155</sup> Tal 77–8.

who attempts to let the GIs escape “the trap of the war.”<sup>156</sup> However, in considering the representation of Vietnam and the Vietnamese characters in O’Brien’s second novel, Renny Christopher voices a quite different, even contradictory view. In her study of the history of American misrepresentation of Asia and numerous works of Vietnam War literature written by both Euro-American combat veterans and Vietnamese immigrant writers, Christopher regards *Going After Cacciato* as one of the novels that are “trying, but failing, to break the mold”: a group of US Vietnam War writings produced by Euro-American authors that attempt to undermine the mould of Asian stereotypes, but nonetheless succumbed to the conventional patterns.<sup>157</sup> Christopher contends that O’Brien, for all his efforts to bring Vietnamese people to the foreground of the story, fails to create characters who possess depth and voices that can destabilize the clichéd representations of Asian or Oriental other. Christopher is in line with Tal and Hellmann in acknowledging that Wan is Berlin’s imaginative creation; however, her assessment of O’Brien’s literary achievement considerably differs. With her mysterious patterns of actions and sexual charms, Sarking Aung Wan is a character who is “beautiful and inscrutable, embodying all the American clichés about Asian Woman” that present Asia

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<sup>156</sup> Tal 78.

<sup>157</sup> Renny Christopher, *The Viet Nam War and the American War: Images and Representations in Euro–American and Vietnamese Exile Narratives* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995) 217–46.

and Vietnam as “a place outside of civilization.”<sup>158</sup> In this way, Christopher criticizes O’Brien’s conformity to preconceived notions about Asia and his lack of efforts to obtain a deeper understanding about Vietnam. Christopher points out that the names of Sarking Aung Wan and Li Van Hgoc—the only two Vietnamese characters that are given specific names in the novel—are incorrect in terms of phonemes and spelling as proper Vietnamese names. In addition to O’Brien’s lack of the knowledge about Vietnam and its people, Christopher criticizes the author for his disregard for “any political analysis, any consideration of the issues of the war, and any knowledge of [...] the politics being fought against,”<sup>159</sup> and contends that *Going After Cacciato* is “a deeply apolitical novel”<sup>160</sup> that solely concerns the sufferings of the GIs and America’s impaired self-image as a nation of exceptional virtues and capabilities, and that fails to imagine the other side.

Even though, as Christopher discusses, O’Brien’s knowledge about the culture and the history of Vietnam proves to be deficient, Christopher’s assertion that *Going After Cacciato* is profoundly apolitical and narcissistic is rather too perfunctory. Notwithstanding the defects of plot and characters, the novel, though imperfectly, does try to question the legitimacy of US military intervention in Vietnam and undermine

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<sup>158</sup> Christopher 232.

<sup>159</sup> Christopher 230.

<sup>160</sup> Christopher 234.

America's myth of its natural virtues and good wars that has been used for justifying the acts of America's excessive violence.

Since Philip D. Beidler's pioneering work, *American Literature and the Experience of Vietnam* (1982), *Going After Cacciato* has been discussed in terms closely related to America's history, myth and their revisions. However, in Beidler's case as his framework almost solely places emphasis on the ways in which myth and preceding works prefigure American Vietnam War experience rather than differences and revisions that Vietnam writers have brought to the tradition, he fails to define the uniqueness of what he calls the acts of "cultural myth-making,"<sup>161</sup> new US writers' literary experiments in imagining/representing the war and its aftermath. When examining *Going After Cacciato*, Beidler defines it as literature of "optative mode" that is distinguished from earlier American writings of Vietnam in that it, on one hand, possesses unswerving allegiance to "the experiential particular" of the war, and, on the other, has "a distinct sense of self-conscious literary contrivance" that is, "an awareness [...] of the inherent artificiality of sense-making considered in terms of any formal articulative design."<sup>162</sup> However, other than asserting the exactitude of the details of Vietnam combat experiences described in the novel that Beidler, as a Vietnam-vet himself, can testify, and

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<sup>161</sup> Philip Beidler, *American Literature and the Experience of Vietnam* (Athens. Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1982) xi, and passim.

<sup>162</sup> Beidler, *American Literature and the Experience of Vietnam* 140.

outlining the story's structural particulars, he does not explain the ways in which O'Brien's work relates to the myth and preceding works of American literature, an issue that a writer possessing "a distinct sense of self-conscious literary contrivance" must confront.

John Hellmann more convincingly discusses O'Brien's complicated relationship and challenges to America's dominant assumption about its own history. Asserting that the myth of the frontier is one of the United States' most persistent stories retaining the people's images of themselves, Hellmann argues that Vietnam in *Going After Cacciato* is an "anti-frontier"<sup>163</sup>—with its complete lack of any sense of victory and justice on the part of Americans: a completely inverted world of American frontier mythology that frustrates all of the protagonist's expectations. Moreover, examining the ways in which Paul Berlin's father, a veteran of glorious World War II, embodies the images of a good war and a good society that have derived from the frontier myth, Hellmann investigates how Berlin's escape from the war in Vietnam destabilizes America's idealized self-concept of its culture and history. Katherine Kinney's discussion is also worth noting in that it acutely analyses both the novel's implication in and challenges to the myth of America's exceptionalism. Kinney criticizes Hellmann for regarding the Vietnam War as an aberration from the logic of America's history, rather than the consequence of its

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<sup>163</sup> Hellman 161.

imperialism both sustained and covered by the myth of America's innocence and good wars. Contending that *Going After Cacciato* is—along with Joan Didion's *Democracy* and Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men*—"the most complex and self-conscious examples of the allegorical treatment of American imperialism in Vietnam War narratives,"<sup>164</sup> Kinney closely examines the GIs' journey across the continent that Berlin fantasizes and the memories of traumatic incidents in the war that occasionally invades the protagonist's imagination. According to Kinney, Berlin struggles to contain inconvenient paradoxes—(e.g. Paris, the GIs' ultimate destination, is both the symbol of America's innocence manifested by the victory over fascism in WW II and the origin of the West's imperial rule over Vietnam)—that subvert his wish to believe in the good intentions of the United States. However, the novel's plot such as the detention in Iran, where the GIs face the danger of execution by SAVAK officers—the creature of the covert CIA-led coup to overthrow democratically elected, nationalist government of Muhammad Musaddique in favor of the puppet regime of the Shah—nevertheless reveals the history of American imperialism that has been made invisible by the myth of America's exceptionalism.<sup>165</sup>

By referring to the analyses mentioned above and several others, I will further

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<sup>164</sup> Katherine Kinney, *Friendly Fire: American Images of the Vietnam War* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) 44.

<sup>165</sup> Kinney 52–57.

investigate the ways in which O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato* destabilizes the conventional US ideas about manhood and heroism stemming from American imaginative geography that represent Vietnam as an extension of Indian War battlefield. As discussed earlier, typical in O'Brien's narrative is its attack on the myth of the feral hero—stories of a man endowed with the great physical strength of savages/animals to kill/injure and aristocratic European lineage—that has closely been associated with the myth of the frontier and considered as a distinctive characteristic of an American hero. Not only does O'Brien question the traditional US concept of masculine hero, but he also attempts to redefine the meaning of authentic American character in the time of post-WW II Cold War era.

In examining O'Brien's efforts, I will pay close attention to the scenes from Paul Berlin's childhood—in particular, the episode of Indian camping that he experienced with his father in the woods of his home state, Iowa—that repeatedly appears in every one of the three different narratives. I would argue that by narrating in parallel the failure of Berlin's first initiation into the frontier in his childhood, the excessively severe realities of the war that frustrate/subvert the GIs' prewar expectations, and his escape from the frontier-battleground-like Vietnamese terrain, O'Brien delineates the plight of Vietnam generation who no longer are able to identify themselves with the heroic



warriors of the mythic frontier and their imagined masculine virtues. O'Brien's reflection upon American character in *Going After Cacciato*, I would suggest, results in a frustrating and cynical self-portrayal of a new generation of Americans who can no longer identify with the myth of the nation's exceptional goodness and power.

### **Burgers and Baseball: Paul Berlin As an Anti-Feral Hero**

In reading *Going After Cacciato* as O'Brien's anti-feral tale, it is particularly important to note that the writer creates the character of Paul Berlin in ways that contradict the framework of the conventional US tales of the feral hero. Refusing to embrace the frontier myth and conventional ideas about heroism, courage and manhood as the inherent and exceptional character of the United States and its masculine soldiers, O'Brien instead implies that the American national character for his generation is chiefly banal, mediocre suburban/urban life that consists of the products of its commercial culture and highly developed capitalistic economy.

In contrast to Butler's Clifford Wilkes, who volunteers to serve in Vietnam because of his fascination with Army life, and who later attempts to take part in Vietnamese peoples' pre-modern ways of life, O'Brien's protagonist, Paul Berlin, is described rather as a mediocrity who loves mundanely modern and commercialistic American life. In one of "The Observation Post" chapters, which narrates Berlin's one night sentry duty during which he images the GIs' journey to Paris, the protagonist

thinks that what he desires in his life is merely commonplace happiness that can be enjoyed in any American suburban towns: “Average things. Peace and quiet. It was all he’d ever wanted. Just to live a normal life, to live to an old age” (125). The GIs’ magical journey to Paris, therefore, is not imagined as a way to enact spectacular scenes of violence that abound in films, comic strips and pulp fictions, but as one possible way to return to pedestrian ways of life in the United States: “To see Paris, and then to return to home to live in a normal house in a normal town in a time of normalcy. Nothing grand, nothing spectacular. A modest niche” (125). In this way, Berlin defines himself as an “average” or “normal” American youth who does not fit into the ideal of the frontier warriors.

Furthermore, in contrast to conventional US feral heroes who are supposed to possess a strong sense of self-reliance and willpower, Berlin is portrayed as a passive, lethargic character who almost lacks the self-will that is essential for the protagonist of traditional combat romances. The narrator describes the protagonist’s motives as “shapeless as water,” and describes the ways in which he has spent his life before Vietnam without any strong sense of self-determination and reality, as if “drifting” and “sleepwalking” (226–27). Both in the feral tale and popularized version of Turnerian historiography, the frontier landscape is imagined to be a locus wherein white males shed

off the ennui of decadent European cities and develop exceptionally strong physique and spirit through the contact with the harsh forces of nature and “savage” natives. However, the land of Vietnam in O’Brien’s novel does by no means transform the protagonist, an “average” American boy, into a gallant feral hero.

A close reading of the chapter titled “The Way It Mostly Was” will illuminate the ways in which O’Brien attempts to depict the Vietnamese land as a sort of anti-frontier, an inverted Tarzan country. The chapter belongs to the “realistic” part of the novel, and narrates the GIs’ tough, prolonged mountain-climbing march toward a heavy combat zone where they are expected to fight. The Vietnamese mountainous landscape that the GIs trudge upon is a tropical forest presented as picturesque as Tarzan’s jungle: “The view [is] magnificent, and along the road grew many forms of tropical foliage, and everywhere it [is] wild country and pure” (160). Besides, O’Brien initially seems to bestow a mythic significance upon the GIs’ march:

Straggled out along the red clay road, they formed a column that ran from the base of the mountain, where the Third Squad had just begun the ascent, to the top of the mountain, where *the First Squad moved plastically along a plateau and toward the west and toward the much higher mountains where the battle was being fought.* (161, emphasis added)

In the beginning of the episode, after the above passage O’Brien two more times mentions that the GIs are heading toward western battlefield, and thus carefully evokes the images of the Wild West, as if the soldiers are re-enacting the westward migration of

the mythic fathers. The forces of the Vietnamese natural world—the scorching sun, heat, and drifting dust—apparently look as severe as the New World wilderness, but O’Brien soon undermines the vision of Vietnam as an extension of American frontier/Tarzan country wherein American youth fulfil their mythic roles.

The episode is narrated from two different viewpoints: Lieutenant Sydney Martin, the leader of the squad, observing his subordinate GIs’ march from a vantage point, and Berlin walking the trail in the very rear of the column. Martin, a young graduate of West Point, is a gung-ho soldier whose “[p]ride” is “strength of will,”<sup>166</sup> and his unflinching devotion to “the old rules of command”<sup>167</sup> represents allegiance to US military ideals. Further to this point, his appreciation of “the enduring appeal of battle” that war—“the chance to confront death many times”—makes men heroic is congruous to the logic of the feral tale/the ranger mystique in that both of the discourses regard violent confrontation with an enemy as essential for the formation of authentic American manhood (163). Among all the marching infantrymen, Martin spots a soldier whose name he cannot remember trudging up the hill in the end of the column, and “admire[s] the oxen persistent with witch the last soldier [...] march[es]” (167–68). Watching the GI’s heavy, but steady steps Martin deepens his conviction that war makes men real

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<sup>166</sup> O’Brien, *Going After Cacciato* 165.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid 163.

heroes: he “think[s] that the boy represent[s] so much good—fortitude, discipline, loyalty, self-control, courage, toughness. The greatest gift of God, th[inks] the lieutenant in admiration of Private First Class Berlin’s climb, is freedom of will” (167–68). In Martin’s vision, Berlin and his fellow GIs have undergone a trial in the wilderness, and are now becoming heroic soldiers whose courage, toughness, and power of will are comparable to those of the mythic fathers.

However, when the narrative’s focal point changes from Martin to Berlin, the young lieutenant’s lofty vision is subverted by the prosaic reality of war that the foot soldiers perceive. The narrator explains that the anonymous GI whom Martin observes is Paul Berlin, and depicts the foot soldiers’ psychology from his point of view, thereby contradicting the lieutenant’s thought. Although Martin admires Berlin for his strenuous effort as demonstrating strong willpower appropriate for an exemplary American soldier, Berlin in fact keeps walking by completely different mechanism. The narrator explains that, contrary to Martin’s assumption, “He [Berlin] marche[s] up the road with no exercise of will, no desire and no determination, no pride, just legs and lungs, climbing without thought, without will and without purpose” (167). Berlin, who “kn[ows] he w[ill] not fight well,” and who “ha[s] no love for mission” wishes to stop walking and fall out from the column and the war. He nevertheless keeps moving, not because of his fortitude

and willpower, but merely because his comrades are also marching (167). Berlin feels as if he is “drawn by some physical force—inertia or herd affinity or magnetic attraction” (167). The conflict between the lieutenant’s and the GI’s visions aptly explicates O’Brien’s attempt to undermine the conventional American imaginative geography of Vietnam as an extension of the mythic frontier. Berlin is, just as the feral boy or frontiersman, displaced from cities and located in a foreign land that is supposed to be outside of civilization. However, neither the contact with the land of Vietnam nor the deadly battles against the enemy do not transform the protagonist into a strong-willed warrior celebrated in US mythic narratives. In spite of all the experiences in Vietnam, Berlin is still described as an “average” American, who—just like himself before the war—lacks strong sense of self-reliance, and is drifting and sleepwalking with the tides of the times. The truest courageous act for him, implies O’Brien, is to stop walking and desert the war, but as he is “dull of mind, blunt of spirit, numb of history,” Berlin automatically continues marching. In this way, by describing the character of Berlin in ways that oppose the images of stereotypical American hero, O’Brien tries to destabilize the myth of the feral tale and the image of Vietnam as American males’ ultimate athletic field. Notwithstanding Lazzutti’s remark, Vietnam in O’Brien’s *Going After Cacciato* is by no means a Tarzan country that trains American youth to become a robust feral

warrior.

Accordingly, even though in the novel there are several scenes of crisis that would possibly make spectacles of the protagonist's heroic feats, all the courageous actions that are befitting to a conventional feral hero are supplanted by other characters. First of all, although the GIs' journey to Paris takes place in Berlin's imagination, it is initiated by another character: Cacciato's AWOL from the Third Squad—an incident that actually happens in the realistic part of the novel whose consequence remains unrelated to the end of the novel—triggers the protagonist's power of imagination and makes him fantasize the seemingly impossible adventure. Along the way to Paris, Sarking Aung Wan, a female Vietnamese, rescues the GIs from the NLF's tunnel by showing them a way out. When the GIs are arrested by SAVAK and face the danger of execution in Iran, Cacciato lets them escape the peril by daringly making a surprise attack upon the prison. In Paris, it is Oscar Johnson, black soldier from Bangor, Maine, who takes the initiative in carrying out the mission of capturing Cacciato. That is, throughout the novel, Berlin is deprived of any opportunities to demonstrate his power and heroism, and remains utterly impotent. In addition, it should also be noted that the characters who perform significant actions in O'Brien's deserter narrative are those who do not fit into the mould of stereotypical hero or those whose gender and ethnicity are only given marginal roles in

conventional US feral tale: Cacciato's "naïve and plump,"<sup>168</sup> "fat, slow, going bald"<sup>169</sup> appearance is opposed to that of muscular warriors; female and African characters in Tarzan stories are bereft of agency and merely described as the weak and inferior who work to admire the hero's prowess or justify his mastery over them. Thus, both the land of Vietnam and the magical adventure to Paris for O'Brien's protagonist are portrayed as an inverted Tarzan world that completely contradicts traditional formulas of the feral tale.

Depicting the protagonist helplessly struggling to survive in Vietnam, O'Brien attempts to counter the discourse of the feral tale/ the frontier myth that celebrates white men's regeneration thorough violence in an uncivilized landscape. In so doing, O'Brien takes his critique of America's most powerful myth further and tries to reconsider the legitimacy of the national foundation myth as defining the country's essential characteristics. By narrating Berlin's frustrating struggle in Vietnam and his childhood camping experience in American frontier landscape in parallel, the writer asserts that, for American youth of the Vietnam generation, the frontier is no longer a home to return to, a symbolic landscape that defines the exceptional goodness and capability of American citizens. Instead, it is banal, mundane townscape of American suburb and its

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<sup>168</sup> O'Brien, *Going After Cacciato* 8.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid 120.



commercialistic amusements that give them the most poignant nostalgia, and that defines the chief characteristic of American manhood.

The protagonist's memories of his childhood are inserted in between Berlin's imagined journey to Paris and flashbacks of violent incidents of the war. One episode features going camping with his father in the pristine woods along Des Moines River in Iowa. As John Hellmann argues, Berlin's father—a veteran of the Second World War who fought in France—is closely associated with the landscapes of American frontier, and embodies both “the mythic concepts of a good society and a good war” that the frontier experience and the western migration have been considered to foster.<sup>170</sup> At once closely related to the triumph of WW II and the images of a liberator and goodness that America represented therein, Berlin's father is Berlin's guide who initiates his son into the life and the spirit of the American frontier. At the camping site, both the father and the son participate in a recreational workshop in which they experience Native Americans' ways of hunting and gathering. Berlin and his father assume Indian-like sobriquet—“Little Bear” and “Big Bear” respectively—and join various activities such as canoe racing and campfire. By entering the frontier landscape and undergoing the trials therein, little Berlin is to perform his duty of experiencing feral boyhood and appropriate the survival skills of Native Americans. Whereupon he is expected to evolve

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<sup>170</sup> Hellmann 162.

into a man of great power and spirit, an “authentic” American male who fulfils the role of the feral hero extolled in US mythic narratives.

In regard to this episode, it is also important to note that the GIs’ ultimate destination is Paris, France. As it is a place that reminds America of its innocent, glorious victory over fascist Nazis in World War II, it also implies Berlin’s wish to relate to the myth of America’s just wars and its heroic warriors. However, Paris, at the same time, represents things quite contrary to the ideals of American myth. It is firstly one of the centres of European metropolises whose corruption and feminizing effects the mythic fathers rejected. More importantly, as Kinney points out, Paris is also a site that “marks a return to the origins of the Vietnam War, the seat of the French Empire which sought to reestablish its control over the land, resources, and people of Vietnam at the close of World War.”<sup>171</sup> As the former imperial centre of French colonial Indochina, along with the memory of the triumphant victory in WW II, Paris inevitably brings back the history of the West’s colonial rule over Southeast Asia. Furthermore, since it was a site for Treaty of Paris in 1898, the city also reminds America of its own colonial dominance in the Pacific and East Asia starting with the acquisition of Spanish colonies—Puerto Rico, the West Indies, the island of Guam, and the Philippines—and thus the GIs’ journey to Paris prompts the reader to interpret US military intervention in Vietnam as America’s

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<sup>171</sup> Kinney 48.

latest colonial enterprise. The protagonist's attempt to connect with America's myth of exceptional goodness and power, therefore, involves the grave contradiction, and is doomed to end up in failure.

Accordingly, little Berlin's initiation into the frontier also turns out to be utterly fruitless. In parallel with the episodes of the GIs' escape from the battlefield and flashbacked scenes of the death of Berlin's comrades, what Berlin remembers is an embarrassing memory of getting lost in a mock Indian ritual of hunting in the woods: "Then the third day, into the woods, father first and son second, Little Bear tracking Big Bear, who leaves tracks and paw prints. Yes, he [Berlin] remember[s] it—Little Bear getting lost. .... Lost, bawling in the woods" (40–1). His initiation into the frontier life fails, and Berlin is thus disqualified from inheriting America's mythic legacy whose values represented by the figure of his immediate father. In this way, by describing Berlin as an anti-feral hero who fails in his attempts to connect with the legacy of the frontier, O'Brien attempts to question the legitimacy of the myth of the feral hero and the frontier rangers as America's master narrative that predominantly informs American youth's passage into manhood. Instead of the legacy of the frontier, what O'Brien finds to be the most cogent value system that defines the character of the protagonist is rather pedestrian, commercialistic culture of the contemporary United States. After being

rescued and leaving the camping field with his father, little Berlin finds tremendous relief in getting back to familiar, ordinary objects of suburban life: “Hamburgers and root beer on the long drive home, baseball talk, white men talk, and he remember[s] it, the sickness going away. Pals forever” (41). These mediocre commodities of capitalized US society, in Berlin’s eyes, represent home, and appear more familiarly American than the strenuous life in the frontier woods.

In this way, in *Going After Cacciato*, O’Brien challenges conventional US ideas about masculinity and heroism that is closely related to the myth of the frontier and its popularized variations. O’Brien poses a significant question about the true meaning of American manhood in the post WW II United States: by paralleling the protagonist’s failed initiation to the life of the frontier hunters with the GIs’ escape from Tarzan country, the Vietnam-vet writer suggests that what defines the character of the contemporary US society is not the mythic frontier spirit that drove Americans to move westward, conquering the hostile Indians and the untamed wilderness—the experience that Fredrick Jackson Turner and his protégés have expounded as the basis of America’s democratic character—but rather the mundane suburban life replete with pedestrian commercial products.

### **The Frontier Revisited and Redefined : “On the Rainy River”**

“On the Rainy River”—a complete short story in its own right as well as being a part of

the interrelated stories of *The Things They Carried* (1990)—published more than twenty years later than *Going After Cacciato*, is O’Brien’s latest attempt to revise his previous desertion narrative. Although this time the story takes place solely in the United States before the protagonist’s tour of duty, it again narrates the predicament and the failure of an American youth who seeks a way out from the war, America’s involvement in which he does not justify. In so doing, it tries to revise the theme of courage and heroism in the time of war and crisis that O’Brien failed to fully develop in *Going After Cacciato*.

While in *Going After Cacciato*, the protagonist finds himself utterly alienated from both the frontier landscape and the myth that the space has represented, in “On the Rainy River,” Tim O’Brien—the protagonist and the narrator of the story as well as the public writer himself—attempts to revive the frontier setting as a site where men undergo a trial and demonstrate courage in its profoundest sense that is different from the efficient perpetration of violence in a warzone. I will examine the ways in which O’Brien has his deserter-protagonist reconnected to the myth of the frontier, not as an atavism to the jingoistic tales of the frontier warriors, but as means to resuscitate the idea of civil disobedience by reworking the images of the pristine American landscape conceived by preceding American writers such as Henry David Thoreau and Ernest Hemingway. In doing this, O’Brien tries to revise the myth in the light of the failure of the Vietnam War,

and to achieve a personal as well as collective redemption of the Vietnam generation who were propelled to the foreign battlefield by the societal pressure that derived its force from the myth of America's just wars.

In "On the Rainy River," O'Brien attempts to develop the theme of courage and heroism in the time of crisis/war that he dealt with in his second novel, by compelling Tim O'Brien—the public writer's fictitious persona as well as the protagonist and the narrator of *The Things They Carried*—to face a painful choice between going to the war he does not justify and evading the draft that may lead to public humiliation and an almost lifelong separation from his home land. As the story opens with the narrator's remark—"This one story I've never told before. Not to anyone. Not to my parents, not to my brother or sister, not even to my wife. To go into it, I've always thought, would only cause embarrassment for all of us, a sudden need to be elsewhere, which is the natural response to a confession"—it is written in the form of Tim O'Brien's "confession" of a certain past event that he has avoided revealing for more than twenty years since the end of his service.<sup>172</sup> The event in question—young O'Brien's attempted draft evasion—happens in the summer of 1968, when the narrator-protagonist takes a short trip to a woodlands retreat near the northern border of Minnesota, where Rainy River divides his home country from Canada.

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<sup>172</sup> Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (New York: Broadway, 1998) 40.

It should be noted that, in this short story too, O'Brien describes the young protagonist as a yield of suburban American life who "hated camping out," and who "hated dirt and tents and mosquitos" (41). Far from being a man of woods—the progeny of the mythic Frontiersmen—who "can be really comfortable in the bush"<sup>173</sup>—that Hemingway, for instance, idealized, the protagonist-Tim O'Brien is merely a college graduate who has been reared solely in the suburban environment of the post WW II American middle class society. In a way that reminds Paul Berlin, a self-proclaimed "average" American youth, O'Brien depicts the protagonist as an "ordinary" person who is by no means gifted with exceptional powers of mythic heroes. The narrator defines the young protagonist as "[t]wenty-one years old, an ordinary kid with all the ordinary dreams and ambitions" and explains that all he "wanted [i]s to live the life [he] [i]s born to—a mainstream life—[he] love[s] baseball and hamburgers and cherry cokes ..."

(50). It is worth noting that the narrator-O'Brien recalls the series of events taking place in the summer of 1968 in the late 1980s, about twenty years after the end of his service in Vietnam. He had already undergone the excessively painful experience of war—a situation in which "the problems of killing and dying" actually "fall[s] within [one's] special province"—that has traumatized him ever after (41). Therefore, the

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<sup>173</sup> Ernest Hemingway, "Camping Out," *Dateline: Toronto: The Complete Toronto Star Dispatches, 1920–1924*, ed. William White (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1985) 44–48. 47.

protagonist's penchant for "ordinary" ways of life in his homeland can be understood as his reaction against the distressing memory of the war. When comparing his Vietnam combat experience with pre-war life in his hometown, the narrator would naturally incline to appreciate the peace of US suburban town, however mediocre and boring it may be. But it is equally important to point out that the protagonist's predilection for "ordinary" way of life and "ordinary" American products evokes the sequence of the failed camping in *Going After Cacciato*, wherein little Berlin finds a great relief in coming back to enjoy mediocre commodities of American suburban environment after getting lost in the woods. That is, in "On the Rainy River" too, O'Brien creates a protagonist whose powerlessness contradicts the images of conventional US masculine heroes. Even though the series of events narrated in the story is in the protagonist's pre-war experience, it is actually a reworking of O'Brien's previous novel: by once again describing the impotent, anti-heroic protagonist's journey across the frontier landscape, the Vietnam-vet writer tries to revise his previous deserter narrative, his challenge to the tradition and myth that romanticize men's regeneration thorough violence.

At the same time, however, author O'Brien does not fail to indicate the persistence and pervasiveness of the discourse of the frontier mythology in US society and the ways in which the conventional ideas about courage, heroism and masculinity



deeply affect the psyche of American youth. Unlike the people of his hometown Worthington, Minnesota—“a conservative little spot on the prairie, a place where tradition count[s]”—whose “blind, thoughtless automatic acquiesce to” American Cold War evangelism, and whose “simple minded patriotism, [...] prideful ignorance” he despises, young O’Brien does not justify US military intervention in Vietnam (45). The protagonist opposes the war, writes anti-war editorials on the campus newspaper, and supports Gene McCarthy’s Democratic nomination campaign for the 1968 presidential election, though all those activities are “nothing radical, no hothead stuff,” a “modest stand against the war” (41). In any case, at the first glance, author O’Brien seems to create a binary opposition between the people of Worthington who fully conform to the imperative of the myth of America’s righteous foreign missions, and the protagonist O’Brien who expresses antagonism toward them. Indeed, as already examined above, the protagonist’s character does not fit into the mould of stereotypical, masculine American heroes. On the other hand, the words of reproach that O’Brien imagines the townsfolk hurling at draft-dodgers are loaded with overt jingoism and machismo: “how the dammed sissy had taken off to Canada” (45). In this way, there seems to exist a striking contrast between the two contending camps. However, in describing the persistence of America’s hegemonic discourse about war and its self-image, author O’Brien suggest

that even the protagonist himself is not immune from conventional US concepts about heroism and manhood.

The narrator explains that before receiving the draft notice and facing the serious choice between the war and desertion, the protagonist O'Brien has thought that in a time of crisis he is able to perform courageous deeds, following his conscience and disregarding personal interest:

All of us, I suppose, like to believe that in a moral emergency we will behave like the heroes of our youth, bravely and forthrightly, without thought of personal loss or discredit. Certainly that was my conviction in the summer of 1968. Tim O'Brien: a secret hero. The Lone Ranger. If the stakes ever became high enough—if the evil were evil enough, if the good were good enough—I would simply tap a secret reservoir of courage accumulating inside me over the years. (39–40)

In the summer of 1968, the most courageous act possible for young O'Brien is to evade the draft, to voice a strong protest against the publicly mandated mission whose legitimacy he does not believe in. By doing so, he would also challenge the myth and the tradition of American exceptionalism and its masculine warriors that the town's people identify with, and that are closely related to the formation of the then US foreign policies in Southeast Asia. In the above passage, however, in spite of his wish to defy US doctrines of war and masculinity the protagonist figures the very courage to do so in terms of the image of a popular frontier hero, the Lone Ranger. Mediocre and powerless as he is, young O'Brien, like the GIs in *Going After Cacciato*, still expresses his idea of

courage and heroism relying on the images of the mythic heroes reproduced throughout US popular media. It is quite ironical, for the Lone Ranger—the western gunman with the iconic black mask sitting astride the white stallion called Silver—represents the very tradition that the protagonist wishes to challenge.

Closely examining the history and the development of the plot formula of *The Lone Ranger* in various radio, television, novel and comic strip series, Chadwick Allen asserts that the Lone Ranger has been a “pervasive and powerful representation of the American frontier hero, serviceable to the changing requirements of dominant White fantasy.”<sup>174</sup> Allen especially focuses on the ways in which the pairing of the Lone Ranger, the white gunman, and Tonto, the Indian sidekick, outfights outlaws and “bad” Indians to preserve the frontier justice. According to Allen, the Lone Ranger–Tonto pairing is “the center piece of any fully developed Lone Ranger series” that “highlights the Lone Ranger and Tonto’s role in resolving the nation’s larger problems of political and cultural unity by solving specific problems of particular men and women struggling on the western frontier.”<sup>175</sup> Through the Lone Ranger texts produced in the 1940s and 1950s, the romanticized collaboration between the exemplary white warrior and the good Indian who “work together in order for a ‘happy’ ending of U.S. economic and White

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<sup>174</sup> Chadwick Allen, “Hero With Two Faces: *The Lone Ranger* as Treaty Discourse,” *American Literature* Vol. 68, No. 3 (September 1996): 609–638. 610.

<sup>175</sup> Allen 110.

cultural expansion to prevail on the Indian–White frontier”<sup>176</sup> has provided White Americans an ideal self-image in which their mid-nineteenth-century western migration is “glorified as a noble and necessary endeavor, their interactions with indigenous people as an ideal of good intentions and their involvement in large-scale war as an exercise in negotiating local submission to U.S. expansionist goals through the strategic employment of indigenous allies.”<sup>177</sup> That is, in its unflinching confidence in the United States’ exceptional virtue and strength, the story of the Lone Ranger is strikingly similar to the types of mythic narratives that Worthington’s people identify with.

Moreover, it is equally important to note that the character of the Lone Ranger is the variation of traditional US feral hero. Allen’s thorough examination of *The Lone Ranger* texts leads us to confirm that it certainly is one of conventional US frontier romances that narrate the noble white man’s regeneration thorough violence in the uncivilized landscape of the west.<sup>178</sup> Further to this point, in collaborating with Tonto, the Lone Ranger in effect usurps the Indian’s power and authenticity as the native of the western frontier, thereby making himself an orthodox American hero fighting in “his” homeland, jut as Tarzan usurps indigenous Africans’ power and nativity. In this way, in a

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<sup>176</sup> Allen 617.

<sup>177</sup> Allen 618.

<sup>178</sup> In the first radio script, the narrator explains that although the Lone Ranger has a great linguistic ability to converse with native Americans by speaking like “the injuns, in their own crazy way of talkin,” he, when speaking English, talks “like a gentleman from one of them Eastern Colleges. Thus the Lone Ranger distances himself his western peers. See Allen 620.

relatively small space located near the beginning of the story, O'Brien effectively describes both the protagonist's desire to defy America's dominant myth that drives the nation to the morally ambiguous war in Vietnam and the persistence of the discourse that he aims to challenge. Young O'Brien despises the uncritical, blind patriotism of his neighbours. His own language and thought, however, are also confined within the terms and vocabulary of the mythic narrative he intends to question.

This dilemma, the difficulty to challenge the hegemonic discourse that has deeply been embedded in the collective memory of US society is also illustrated in the sentences that immediately follow the above passage: "Courage, I used to think, comes to us in finite quantities, like an inheritance, and by being frugal and stashing it away and letting it earn interest, we steadily increase our moral capital in preparation for the day when the account must be drawn down" (40). Just as the people of Worthington associate themselves with the myth of America's good wars and good society derived from early US frontier experience, so young O'Brien is almost convinced that the characteristics of the mythic frontier heroes—their righteousness, prowess, and strength—are handed down to him as an inheritance. The very same passage, however, subverts the "natural" or legitimate connection with the mythic frontier warriors that young O'Brien imagines. For the protagonist's idea of courage being saved and accumulating interest like a deposit

suggests how far America has changed since the times of Western migration. In fact, in the summer of 1968, the frontier had been closed for almost a century and the anti-modern, agrarian ethics that America once supposedly had has already been taken over by the interest of modern, capitalistic US society, by which essential values of human beings, even courage, is estimated. The supposedly traditional virtue of American men is described as something, like money, counted and managed by white-collar workers in the offices of urban centres, where America's current economic prosperity is administered. O'Brien thus implies that the wild frontier battlefields is no longer a place to return to for Americans, and the conventional concepts of American males' courage and heroism that are associated with it are no more than untenable, illusory fantasies. In this manner, in the beginning of the story O'Brien casts doubt upon the dominant narratives of US frontier mythology—the courage and valour of the frontier warriors fighting in uncivilized landscapes as the inheritance for succeeding generations of American males—that works to regard Vietnam as an extension of the frontier battlefield, and that, as a great societal pressure, propelled a multitude of Vietnam generation youth to the war whose legitimacy they did not believe in.

### **The Middle-Class Dilemma and the Reality of the Wounded Body**

Before proceeding to examine the dramatic climax of the story that takes place in the woods of northern US–Canadian border, a preceding scene in Worthington merits a brief

mention, since it offers us a further understanding of O'Brien's effort to create an acutely realistic account of an "average," middle-class, American youth's plight in the Vietnam War era. Moreover, it also gives us a glimpse into the ways in which the writer struggles to bring back the elusive reality of pain into the writing of war in order to contradict romanticized images of combat. In the summer of 1968, young O'Brien works in a meatpacking factory in his hometown, and his job therein is called "declotter," whose task is to remove blood clots from the necks of dead pigs by using "a kind of water gun" (42). Being informed of the protagonist's shock at receiving a draft notice, the reader then goes through minute descriptions of animal carcasses and the gory procedures of meatpacking that he experiences at the factory. The dreary depiction of the low-wage labour certainly matches the protagonist's funereal state of mind at finding himself in danger of death in a foreign battlefield, and effectively represents his agony over an inner conflict: O'Brien has to make an impossible choice between going to the war that he does not justify and to evade the draft risking an eternal exile from his homeland. Historian Christian Appy's explanation of the middle-class men's draft experience is especially instrumental in unpacking the symbolic significance of the meatpacking factory as representing young O'Brien's despair. In his study of the class inequality in the US draft system of the Vietnam War era, Appy demonstrates that whilst many of the

then working--class American draftees considered military service in Vietnam to be a “natural, essentially unavoidable part of life”<sup>179</sup> that most of their peers were also obliged to undergo, the middle-class men tended to take it rather as a deviation from the ordinary course of life, since they had numerous ways to evade or defer conscription, and “the effort to avoid the draft was commonly accepted as legitimate and normal, if not always ethically consistent.”<sup>180</sup> Therefore, the middle-class youth who had a reservation about draft avoidance because of ethical reason had to face an agonizing dilemma about whether to go to the morally ambiguous war or contrive means of draft dodging at the expense of the life of someone else who would replace him. Further to this point, since military service was presented to him as a choice among other possibilities, rather than his inevitable fate, “men from wealthier families were likely to view the military as an agent of downward social mobility, an unnatural, dislocating move across a social frontier—*like moving from a college campus to a factory floor.*”<sup>181</sup> Therefore, it is not a mere coincidence that O’Brien also expresses the protagonist’s agony over the draft through his “downward” social move from college campus—“Phi Beta Kappa and summa cum laude and president of the student body and a full-ride scholarship for grad studies at Harvard”—to the factory (41). That is, the setting of the meatpacking factory

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<sup>179</sup> Christian Appy, *Working Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993) 53.

<sup>180</sup> Appy 51.

<sup>181</sup> Appy 53, emphasis added.



not only communicates the protagonist's personal despair at finding himself forced to make a impossible decision, but also represents a collective consciousness of American middle-class youth whose fear for the draft was aggravated by the dreadful prospect of dislocation from their own society.

In addition, the scene of the slaughterhouse works to represent the sober realities of war that potentially subverts the narrative of conventional combat romance as well as the deceptive, euphemized visions of war that the authorities often propagate. The detailed images of the animal carcasses in the factory inevitably evoke soldiers' injured bodies—both Americans' and Vietnamese'—that appear throughout *The Things They Carried*, and that young O'Brien is to eyewitness later in the battlefield. They, for instances, remind Curt Lemon's body destroyed by landmine in "How to Tell a True War Story" and the corpse of a Vietnamese boy whom O'Brien kills in "The Man I Killed." As young Tim O'Brien tries to remove clotted blood from dead pigs, a "red mist" splashed from the carcass and drenched him. The ominous blood shower forebodes the mist of blood that is to shroud the protagonist in Vietnam. Moreover, the smell of the blood that does not disappear from his own body implies the memory of war crimes that the US military perpetrated in Vietnam that would haunt the United States ever after and subvert the images of goodness that it has identified itself with. Although young O'Brien

did not know it yet, the My Lai Massacre had been perpetrated in 16 March 1968, only a few months earlier than his conscription, and—when it was exposed about a year later—brought about international outrage and fostered domestic opposition to the war. In fact, one of O’Brien’s artistic virtues as a writer of war fictions resides in the ways in which he constantly reminds the reader of the fact that the central activity of war is injuring. As Elaine Scarry argues, the absolute reality of war—its primary purpose is to outinjure the opponent by shelling, impaling, burning, bombing, and shooting human tissues—often slips from view because of the essential difficulty in translating pain into language; moreover, the infliction of pain is often omitted, or renamed in ways that makes the very fact of the destruction of human bodies invisible in every kind of written text and verbal expression about war.<sup>182</sup> By contrast, as already seen in the protagonist’s identification with the Lone Ranger, the hegemonic discourse that works to romanticize battle easily diffuses itself and is capable of penetrating a people’s psyche. O’Brien tries to counter the popularized, cunningly insinuating images of heroic combat by making his persona time and again remember the elusive reality that war’s central activity is the destruction of human bodies. The above scene of the meatpacking factory is a fine example of the author’s attempts to challenge the romanticized view of war such as the

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<sup>182</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985) 60–81.

Vietnam War as America's latest mission to establish/defend democracy in a foreign uncivilized land threatened by pro-Russian communists, by "permitting the entry of the reality of suffering into the description."<sup>183</sup>

### **The Northern Frontier**

As examined above, in the first half of the story O'Brien in several ways attempts to undermine the dominant myth that has derived from early US colonial experience in the frontier of the New Continent. At the same time, however, in "On the Rainy River" O'Brien also attempts to redeem the frontier landscape as a site where an American demonstrates courage in its truest sense that is different from the conventions of the frontier combat romances such as *The Lone Ranger*. While in *Going After Cacciato* Berlin's father, the veteran of WW II, serves as the protagonist's guide to the woods and the mythic world of the frontier, in "On the Rainy River" the character who initiates young Tim O'Brien to the life and the virtues of the frontier life is Elroy Berdahal, who was "eighty years old, skinny and shrunken and mostly bald," and who ran an inn called Tip Top Lodge in the vicinity of the Rainy River (48). In recounting the episode of young O'Brien and the solitary old man living in the woods, the Vietnam-vet writer in effect returns to the scene of the initiation ritual in the frontier woods that Paul Berlin fails to complete. As in the case of Berlin, young O'Brien also fails to overcome a trial in

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<sup>183</sup> Scarry 66.

the frontier landscape that the old man leads him to undergo. However, this time O'Brien narrates the protagonist's failed attempt in the frontier setting not only to reiterate the Vietnam generation's failure (or rejection) to live up to the conventional ideals of the mythic frontiersmen's courageous manhood, but also to reconsider the meaning of courage and manhood and, to use Philip Beidler's term, "rewrite" the myth of the frontier in the light of the Vietnam War experience.<sup>184</sup> In other words, in "On the Rainy River," O'Brien describes the frontier of northern Minnesota not as an extension of Indian battlefield, but as a dense wood retreat where conscientious objectors perform the act of civil disobedience.

In reading "On the Rainy River" as O'Brien's revision of the frontier mythology, it is particularly important to note that the northern territory where the protagonist goes in his attempt to desert the war is not merely a physical space located in between two different countries. More importantly, the setting is also a symbolic locus that deeply resonates with the images and the significances of the frontier landscapes that have appeared in the works of preceding American writers. As young O'Brien drives north, the narrator describes the ways in which the familiar suburban scenery of his home is gradually replaced by the pristine woods of the northern frontier: "The land [is] mostly

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<sup>184</sup> Philip D Beidler, *Re-writing America: Vietnam Authors in Their Generation* (London and Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1991) xii, 5, and passim.

wilderness. Here and there [O'Brien] passe[s] a motel or bait shop, but otherwise the country unfold[s] in great sweeps of pine and birch and sumac" (47). The scarcely inhabited forest landscape evokes what R.W.B Lewis calls "timeless" space of New World—the uncivilized frontier wilderness that the Western immigrants considered as having no trace of human history—wherein Cooperesque heroes fought Indian enemies.<sup>185</sup> It also relates to Jack London's Klondike stories such as "In a Far Country," "At the Rainbow's End," and "To Build a Fire," in which the writer portrayed the immigrants' anti-modern impulse and their struggle with the overwhelmingly brutal forces of the northern frontier in the late nineteenth-century.<sup>186</sup> The uncivilized landscape of US-Canadian border in this way reminds one of the images/stories of the frontier that dramatize men's conflict with nature and native enemies. However, young O'Brien's intention to journey across the frontier landscape is neither to fight against Indian enemies, nor to expose himself to the severe elements of the natural world and test his masculine strength therein. The protagonist moves northward to evade the draft, to seek a shelter from the impending crisis of the war. When examining O'Brien's attempts to rewrite the myth of the frontier, the most significant preceding US writing about the frontier landscape is Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River" (1925). Therein, the

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<sup>185</sup> R.W.B Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1955) 90–109.

<sup>186</sup> Jack London, *Klondike Tales* (New York: The Modern Library, 2001).

writer's persona, Nick Adams, attempts to alleviate the trauma of WWI in the northern Michigan woodland, by witnessing the regenerative powers of his homeland. I would argue that, by reworking Hemingway's story of an American young man's post-WWI predicament, O'Brien illuminates the plight of the Vietnam generation Americans who were forced to fight in a war that they didn't justify. In so doing, O'Brien attempts to resuscitate the idea/practice of civil disobedience—Thoreauvian resistance to the mandate of power—in the post-Vietnam–War era, by connecting Hemingway's fictional frontier landscape with the spiritual frontier that Thoreau found in the countryside of New England, and by asserting it as the genuine homeland that Americans should return to.

In Hemingway's semi-autobiographical story, the protagonist is portrayed as an experienced angler who is well acquainted with great skills and strict moral codes of surviving in the woods, and thus Adams solitarily enters into the wilderness, happily separated from the bustles of cities. Hemingway makes a striking contrast between the “burnt over”<sup>187</sup> townscape of Seney that metaphorically signifies the great devastation that WWI brought about and the resilient forces of nature of the north Michigan frontier that Adams walks into, and that forebodes the protagonist's possible recovery from the wounds—both physical and psychological—that he has suffered in the war. As the

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<sup>187</sup> Ernest Hemingway, *In Our Time* (New York: Scribner, 1958) 133.

shell-shocked protagonist walks uphill, the charred flora of Seney are gradually replaced by lush green foliage—he is pleased to find “the country alive again”—and his mood changes from the state of stupor at finding the burnt country to optimism inspired by the resilience of the natural world (136). By carrying out methodical, almost ritualistic actions of camping/fishing that reward him with a pleasant sense of physical exhaustion and with provisions, Adams is temporarily able to leave behind the tormenting memory of the war, and feels as if he has become harmonized with the curative power of nature.

However, Hemingway does not provide such an easy solution to the protagonist’s difficulties: Adams’s attempts to alleviate pain are now and again disrupted by the reminders of the war and modernity. For instance, along the way to the camping site beside the river, Adams finds grasshoppers that are entirely covered with black soot, although the forest fire was quenched almost a year ago, and wonders “how long they w[ill] stay that way” (136). The great impact of the fire that continually affects the life-forms of the forest reminds one of the enormous devastation that the war has wreaked upon both individuals and societies, and ominously forebodes the protagonist’s fate: Adams might be haunted by the trauma of the war for the rest of his life. Moreover, even the joy and excitement of fishing at any time change into the dreadful reminder of the war. When fishing in the river, Adams recalls a mass of dead trout killed by

inexperienced fishermen's ignorance. It was utterly meaningless carnage, since they had once been released for their smallness; they nevertheless were killed, because amateur fishermen's dry hands had damaged their delicate mucus (149). On one hand, this episode serves to emphasize Adams's status as an experienced outdoorsman who "can be really comfortable in the bush"<sup>188</sup>: he knows how to avoid unnecessary troubles in the woods, and is equipped with frontier ethics and skills of survival that most of his peers don't possess. On the other, however, on the symbolic plane, the incident serves as a reminder of WWI that interrupts the protagonist's peace of mind: the horrifying images of dead fish—"furry with white fungus, drifted against a rock, or floating belly up in some pool"—evoke human bodies severely destroyed by the mass destruction weapon that the protagonist witnessed left lying on the battlefield of WWI (149). It is not a mere coincidence that O'Brien also narrates the atrocities committed in the Vietnam War using the images of animal carcass. The Vietnam-vet author adopts Hemingway's metaphorical narrative device, and tries to recount the brutality of mass violence that tend to disappear from view in many accounts of war.

In examining Hemingway's complex relationship with the frontier landscape, it is particularly important to point out that "Big Two-Hearted River" is virtually the writer's return to and challenge to the myth of the frontier. On one hand, Hemingway attempts to

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<sup>188</sup> Hemingway, "Camping Out" 47.



revive American mythology that regards the frontier landscape as the birthplace of the nation's exceptional virtues: he describes Adams as a reincarnation of a self-reliant frontier yeoman, and attempts to identify his recovery from the painful memories of WWI with his return to the landscape of America's mythic origin. As in conventional US frontier narratives, Hemingway depicts the protagonist's experiences in the woods as a conflict with the forces of nature: the writer describes all the grasshoppers and trout that Adams captures as his male competitors, and the frontier angler is rewarded with a pleasant sense of accomplishment and satisfying meal for winning the battle.<sup>189</sup>

However, it should be noted that Hemingway describes the protagonist's restrained use of power in fishing in ways that make a striking contrast with the mass violence of modern weaponry in WWI that are metaphorically associated with the images of the burnt townscape of Seney and of the dead trout killed by inexperienced fishermen: Adams only kills the creatures that are essential for his own survival, and avoids meaningless slaughter. In other words, Hemingway portrays Adams's camping experience as meaningful actions that are based upon strict frontier ethics, and that possibly restores to the protagonist the "good" and "old" senses of law and order that were lost in the catastrophe of WWI.

On the other hand, however, Hemingway's complex prose at the same time works

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<sup>189</sup> Hemingway, *In Our Time* 148, 152, and passim.

to subvert the protagonist's wishes to retrieve the good "old feeling," and to identify with America's mythic frontiersmen (134). As examined above, Adams's efforts to relieve his pains are constantly interrupted by the reminders of the war that he stumbles upon in the woods. The impossibility of the protagonist's complete recovery in effect signifies Hemingway's doubt about the traditional values that the frontier myth and its heroes represent. The story of "Big Two-Hearted River" takes place in the aftermath of WWI, about a quarter of century later than the closure of the American frontier in the late-nineteenth century, as postulated by Frederick Jackson Turner. At that time, America, which had once been a vast untamed wilderness where mythic pioneers struggle with the severe forces of nature to found their colonies, was rapidly transforming into a modern, capitalistic society dominated by emerging classes of wealthy capitalists such as Hopkins, one of Adams's old friends, who made a fortune out of the oil business (141). Hemingway seems to express his disdain for the *nouveaux riches* and the value system they represent through Adams's bitter recollection of the lost friendship. Nevertheless, I would argue that the author is unable to fully conceal his suspicion that what was once America's master narrative has already become outdated and untenable. Adams's return to the frontier landscape—"the good place," the birthplace of America's mythic fathers and their good society—and to the traditional moral codes does not revitalize him into a

mighty warrior (139).

In this way, Hemingway describes the beautiful natural landscape of northern woodland as a kind of refuge where Adams walks across in order to escape from the tormenting memory of WWI, although the protagonist does not fully succeed in healing himself of the pains. O'Brien reuses Hemingway's idea of depicting the northern frontier landscape as a shelter from the threats of war, and makes his persona go to the north Minnesota countryside in his attempt to run away from the crisis. However, the picturesque scenery of the northern woodland does not offer young O'Brien any kinds of peace of mind. Just as Adams is compelled to face the reminders of the war in the woods despite his wish to the contrary, so does young O'Brien have to continue agonizing over the impossible choice between the war and desertion. Besides, as examined above, O'Brien's protagonist is a novice camper, who is very likely to get lost if placed in the middle of the frontier landscape. Thus, the uneasiness of being in an unfamiliar environment adds to the protagonist's agony and does not work to assuage the protagonist's suffering. While Hemingway's Adams is a reincarnation of the frontier yeoman who is able to cut his way through the pristine forest, and who tries to establish his private colony therein, O'Brien's persona utterly lacks the skills essential to a pioneering hero.

In order to relate his own protagonist to Hemingway's post-war meditation on war and peace, therefore, the writer-O'Brien creates the character of Elroy Berdahal, a mentor, who initiates the protagonist into the ways of life in the woods. In examining O'Brien's attempt to rewrite the myth of the frontier, the character of Berdahal is particularly important to note. As I have already suggested, Berdahal serves as a counterpart to Paul Berlin's father in *Going After Cacciato*, who attempts to initiate the young protagonist to the life of the frontier. Berdahal lets O'Brien stay in the lodge without making any obtrusive inquiries about the young man's situation, and quietly receives him in his solitary abode in the woods. Under the auspice of the old man, the protagonist learns the know-how to carry out essential chores of the frontier yeoman, kinds of which Hemingway's hero is greatly skilled in: "One morning the old man show[s] me how to split and stack firewood, and for several hours we just wor[k] in silence out behind his house" (51).

However, I would argue that while Berlin's father—a veteran of WW II and a successful house-builder—is closely associated with the landscape of American frontier and embodies "the mythic concepts of a good war and a good society,"<sup>190</sup> Berdahal represents a value of a different kind, an alternative American myth of the frontier that O'Brien, as a Vietnam-vet writer, attempts to resuscitate. The narrator describes Berdehal

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<sup>190</sup> Hellmann 162.

as “the hero of [his] life,” the man who saves him, although the seemingly decrepit body of the old man is quite contrary to the conventional images of sturdy, youthful, and masculine Western heroes. Moreover, in contrast to the townsfolk of Worthington who are blinded by their excessive patriotism and believe in the simplistic theory of the war that propagates America’s goodness and power, Berdahal is depicted as erudite and deeply insightful, though he always remains reticent and scarcely reveals his thoughts. The narrator explains that “Elroy Berdahal [i]s no hick. His bedroom ... [i]s cluttered with books and newspapers. He kill[s] me at the Scrabble board, barely concentrating, and on occasions when speech [i]s necessary he ha[s] a way of compressing large thought into small, cryptic packets of language” (49–50). That is, the writer-O’Brien creates the character of Elroy Berdahal, as a solitary sage of the woods and the old man’s secluded life in the “the wilderness” that “seem[s] to withdraw into a great permanent stillness” inevitably evoke the figure of Henry David Thoreau and his retreat to the countryside of Walden pond (49).

The most significant moment of the story happens in the morning of O’Brien’s last day in the lodge, when Berdahal takes him to the Rainy River and lets him make the final decision about desertion. The old man takes the protagonist in his small motorboat, crosses the border into Canadian territory. Pretending to fish in the river, Berdahal

quietly leads O'Brien to face the reality of war and desertion, risking himself being an accessory to draft evasion. I would argue that the scene on the river is in fact an initiation ritual that Berdahal compels the young protagonist to undergo, to test his courage in the time of crisis. The writer-O'Brien reuses the conventional image of the American pristine woodland as a site where American males are expected to demonstrate their courage and prove their manhood. Indeed, the figure of Berdahal fishing in the river that the narrator recalls assumes the appearance of a stern patriarch who watches over his son's initiation ceremony: "It struck me the that he [Berdahal] must've planned it. I'll never be certain, of course, but I think he meant to bring me up against the realities, to guide me across the river and to take me to the edge and to stand a kind of vigil as I chose a life for my self" (56). However, the frontier landscape in which young O'Brien has to undergo the trial of his courage is by no means a reincarnation of Indian battlefield, but it instead is the woodland of a Thoreuvian hermit. As Thoreau, who foresaw the coming closure of western frontier, declared in the mid-nineteenth-century, the frontier experience that genuinely fosters America's democratic national character is not territorial expansion achieved through violent conflicts with nature and indigenous people, but rather an exploration of one's inner frontier, a spiritual clairvoyance obtained by individuals' harmonious relationship with nature, that enables one to understand broader social, and

political realities often neglected by the country's powerful majority, for, according to Thoreau, "[t]he frontiers are not east or west, north or south, but wherever a man fronts a fact."<sup>191</sup> The Facts that the young protagonist has to confront, for instances, are the realities of violence perpetrated upon Vietnamese citizens by US military in Vietnam and the social inequity in the US draft system that O'Brien has implied in the factory section of the story, the inconvenient truths that the Worthington's townsfolk are ignorant of. Thus, the most courageous and heroic act that the protagonist could do therein is to decide to desert the war and go to Canada, daring the risks of a lifelong exile from his homeland. Whereupon, he would perform an act of civil disobedience: nonviolent resistance to America's neocolonialism—without "thought of personal loss or discredit" (39).

Nevertheless, young O'Brien fails in the trial; overwhelmed by the prospect of numerous difficulties that his desertion would entail, he experiences a "moral freeze," or "the paralysis" of the heart, and becomes unable to take any decisive actions to desert the war (57). That is, as in *Going After Cacciato*, in "On the Rainy River" the writer-O'Brien again narrates the story of an American youth who fails both in his attempt at desertion and in his initiation to the frontier. However, this time the frontier landscape the

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<sup>191</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, ed. Robert F. Sayre (New York: Library of America, 1985) 249.

protagonist attempts to relate to is not an extension of Indian battleground, but the woodland of a Thoreauvian hermit, and the story still does retain hope of reviving the concept of the Thoreauvian spiritual frontier and the practice of civil disobedience. As examined above, the story is written in the form of the narrator's confession of the incidents that happened about twenty years ago. That is, by recounting the past event, O'Brien—the narrator and the protagonist of the story—virtually returns to the northern woodlands of Elroy Berdahal, and by overcoming the sense of embarrassment that has prevented him from telling it, O'Brien tries to undo the "moral freeze" and redeem the courage that he lost in the summer of 1968, before he went to Vietnam. In so doing, O'Brien rejects to narrate the story of his survival from the war as a conventional tale of courage and heroism; the narrator finishes the story by asserting that "I survived, but it's not a happy ending. I was coward. I went to the war" (62). For that kind of discourse may mask the questionable nature of American intervention in Indochina and the criminal acts of violence that the US military forces perpetrated in the foreign terrain.

It should be noted that O'Brien wrote *The Things They Carried* from the end of the '70s to the early '90s, when spokesmen of the revisionist history, most notably the President Ronald Reagan himself, tried to reinterpret the Vietnam War as a "noble, unselfish struggle that could have ended in victory," had not the liberal politicians



interrupted the US military efforts.<sup>192</sup> Also, it was the time when—in the reactionary atmosphere of the era that culminates in the successful ending of Gulf War engineered by George H. W. Bush administration—the products of popular entertainment industries such as *Rambo First Blood Part II* (1985) had attempted to transform the quagmire of the Vietnam War into America’s heroic battle pitched against “savage” enemy, an image that greatly echoes the tradition of Indian War mythology.<sup>193</sup> Thus, I would argue that, in writing “On the Rainy River,” Tim O’Brien attempts to counter the revisionist history of the war that associates Vietnam with the frontier of Indian War, by resuscitating the alternative, Thoreauvian frontier as a place to return to, and by reviving the myth of the solitary recluse in the woods as an example of truly noble heroism that conscientious Americans have to sympathize with.

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<sup>192</sup> Slotkin 649.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid 643–54.

## Chapter Five: Vietnam Revisited: Denis Johnson's *Tree of Smoke*

### Writing About Vietnam in Post-9/11 America

Denis Johnson's novel *Tree of Smoke* (2007) opens with two incidents, one historical, the other private, that foreshadow the impact that the experience of the Vietnam War exerts upon US society as well as the fates of American characters traced through the entire plot of the novel: the assassination of President John F Kennedy and a GI's hunting experience in Philippine rainforest. The demise of the President is narrated as shocking news that the Marines posted on Grande Island listen to on the US Armed Forces radio, and next morning William Houston, Jr., one of the American soldiers serving in the island, embarks upon hunting in the dense jungle that surrounds the US military base. Bill Houston at first expects to hunt a wild boar that inhabits the forest, but what he accidentally shoots instead is a monkey whose throes of death ominously resembles that of human:

Seaman Houston felt his own stomach tear itself in two. "Jesus Christ!" he shouted at the monkey, as if it might do something about its embarrassing and hateful condition. [...] Seaman Houston walked over to the monkey and laid the rifle down beside it and lifted the animal up in his two hands, holding its buttocks in one and cradling its head with the other. With fascination, then with revulsion, he realized that the monkey was crying. Its breath came out in sobs, and tears welled out of its eyes when it blinked. It looked here and there, appearing no more interested in him than in anything else it might be seeing. "Hey," Houston said, but the monkey didn't seem to hear.

As he held the animal in his hands, its heart stopped beating. He gave it a shake, but he knew it was useless. He felt as if everything was all his fault, and

with no one around to know about it, he let himself cry like a child. He was eighteen years old.<sup>194</sup>

As reviewer Thomas Jones points out, the two events located in the beginning of the novel are symbolic of America's loss of innocence, the theme that numerous American accounts of the Vietnam War have explored ever since the late 1960s.<sup>195</sup> Elaborating upon Jones's suggestion, one can even argue that the novel's opening epitomizes Johnson's interpretation of the devastating effects of the war that beset the nation's psyche following its escalation, in particular the public's disillusionment with the myth of America's exceptional goodness that derived from the mythology of the frontier.

JFK, whom Francis Xavier Sands—one of the main American characters of the novel—describes as a “beautiful man” (15), embodies the image of America's young and strong leadership in the post World War II era, heroically tackling the problems arising both within and without the United States. As already examined in the first chapter, Kennedy succeeded in gaining the then public's support by invoking the myth of the frontier, and by projecting himself and a new generation of dedicated Americans as modern pioneering heroes eager to confront the challenges that the Cold War had posed.

As epitomized in the slogan of his 1960 presidential campaign—the “New Frontier”—

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<sup>194</sup> Denis Johnson, *Tree of Smoke* (London: Picador, 2007) 4–5.

<sup>195</sup> Thomas Jones, “Rut after Rut after Rut,” rev. of *Tree of Smoke*, by Denis Johnson, *London Review of Books* 29 November 2007, 1 July 2013  
<<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v29/n23/thomas-jones/rut-after-rut-after-rut>>.

Kennedy saw “the United States standing on the edge of a ‘frontier,’ facing a new world of vast potential for either unlimited progress or ultimate disaster.”<sup>196</sup> Further extending his mythical rhetoric, Kennedy and his coterie associated the contemporary world geopolitics with US popular narratives of Indian War, and presented Third World countries where Communists steadily increased their influence as the Cold War frontier. As a “hero-president,”<sup>197</sup> JFK proposed to lead a battle to conquer the insubordinate Indians/Communist insurgents therein and bring to the local people the benefit of free economy and the idea of democracy, thereby extending America’s influence over the world. Since the then public’s hope for America’s great future led by the young president was unusually high, the tragic death of JFK was a traumatic blow to his advocates’ optimistic faith in America’s leadership, and cast a dark shadow upon the prospect of the United States. It seems as if, in retrospect, Kennedy’s death was the prelude to the storm that was to come: the escalation and the quagmire of Vietnam under the successive Johnson administration, and the ensuing moral confusion that divided US society. It was, symbolically at least, the end of an era in which Americans could firmly believe in the myth of America’s essential goodness and might.

If the assassination of Kennedy is a momentous historical event that predicts the

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<sup>196</sup> Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998) 489.

<sup>197</sup> Slotkin 497.

public's disillusionment with America's most cogent myth in the coming decades, Houston's experience on the Philippine island is its private version that forebodes the American characters' doomed future. The rainforest of Grand Island—the landscape that Johnson chooses for Bill Houston's beginning of tour—is a perfect setting that enables the author to create a compelling scene in which a white American youth fails to inherit the legacy of the frontier myth, to become a good and strong American hero. Historians and literary critics such as Richard Slotkin and Amy Kaplan argue that, during the time of Spanish–American War and ensuing Philippine–American War, in seeking the public's consent to America's colonial annexation of the Philippines, prominent politicians and opinion leaders presented the wars as a great opportunity to renew the virile character with which Anglo-Saxon immigrants had developed their inchoate church state into a modern empire, and which Americans now seemed to lose as a result of the “official” closure of the frontier in the late nineteenth-century.<sup>198</sup> In so doing, as typically expressed in Theodore Roosevelt's speech, “The Strenuous Life,” they described the war in the remote terrain as an update of Indian War, identifying the indigenous people of the Philippines with “the Red Indian on the frontier of the United

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<sup>198</sup> Slotkin 51–62. Amy Kaplan, “Romancing the Empire: The Embodiment of American Masculinity in the Popular Historical Novel of the 1890s,” *American Literary History* Vol. 2, No.4 (Winter 1990): 659–90.

States.”<sup>199</sup> In Roosevelt’s and others political propaganda heavily loaded with the terms of their national myth, the foreign Asian islands were figured as an extension of the western frontier, an uncivilized landscape that allows middle class, white Americans to shed off the ennui of the city, to regenerate through the violent conflict with the savage Asian Indians. In short, it was imagined as an exotic backdrop against which American males were to demonstrate their manhood and fighting spirit that live up to their mythic father’s.

Bill Houston moves about the Philippine jungle, hoping to prove his virility through successful hunting experience. He is a new recruit who has just been assigned to his first overseas post. Born and raised in Phoenix, Arizona, Houston spent his early youth in a frustrating environment where the prospect for his future was horribly bleak. He is from a poor white family: his hardworking mother has struggled to earn a living on low wages at a suburban cattle ranch, and his alcoholic stepfather is in jail for felony unidentified in the story. Unable to afford the expense of a higher education, Houston’s own future in the hometown likewise seems to be unpromising. He, therefore, does not regard the United States as a land of inexhaustible wealth of possibilities and resources that it once appeared to be to the early European immigrants. Instead, he sees it as a desolate urban desert where poverty and boredom seem inescapable. Houston’s motives

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<sup>199</sup> Quoted in Slotkin 52.

for signing up for the Marines would not be as disinterested and patriotic as those of the new, devout Americans whom Kennedy romanticized. Rather, he goes aboard in order that he can escape the hardship and destitution that has continued inflicting his family, and that would surely beset him in the near future, if he stayed at home. In spite of this difference, Johnson indicates that, like many other American youths in the early 1960s, Bill Houston is also influenced by the US popular narratives of the frontier myth that JFK relied upon, which had reproduced and reinforced a false association between the American frontier wilderness and Asian Third World countries. When talking with his comrades, Houston explains his own view about Asia, postulating a racial category, “Mokes,” that regards “oriental[s]” such as Vietnamese, Filipinos, and American Indians as identical “Indians,” and that defines them as being essentially different from (and very likely inferior to) Europeans and white Americans: “What I’m saying, [...] about these Mokes. I think they [the Vietnamese people]’re related to Indians that live down around my home. And not just them Indians, but also Indians that are from India, and every other kind of person you can think of who’s like that, who’s got something oriental going on [...]” (133). Rather than merely indicating Houston’s lack of education and knowledge about Asia and its peoples, his disregard for each people’s own cultural background suggests the fact that the eighteen-year old American youth has internalized

the ideological framework of the frontier myth. In particular, he has imbibed its ethnocentric view of the world that dismisses other peoples' agency and sees their history and lands as a mere backdrop to white Americans' adventure. Isolated from both the comforts and the boredom of the city, Houston finds himself in the alien, uncivilized landscape inhabited by "Indians." As it was for Roosevelt, Kennedy, and numerous others who have served to shape the public's perception of the Third World, the remote Asian terrain, for Houston, is an extension of the western frontier, wherein he is to escape the frustrating realities of home, and unleash his virile power suppressed by the constraints of modernity.

In this respect, his attempt to hunt a wild boar is a sort of initiation ceremony that, if successful, enables him to prove his strong manhood commensurate with the mythic fathers—the good and mighty white American warriors, whose images have long been idealized by the politicians such as Kennedy and Roosevelt, as well as by the authors of US popular narratives of the frontier. However, what is meant to be the beginning of Houston's glorious adventure turns out to be a disheartening failure. Instead of the expected game, the young American kills a monkey that cries like a human, and witnessing its agony of death, he recognizes the depressing realities of combat that is often euphemistically effaced from the romanticized tales of battle narrated by US



statesmen and the producers of popular culture—that is, the suffering of people inevitably brought about by the violence occurring in wars.

Not only beclouding the prospect of Houston's own future, the distressing scene of the monkey's death forebodes the senseless killing and destruction caused by American soldiers serving in the Vietnam War, in which many young American youths including James—Bill Houston's younger brother—are to participate. A short while later, at the end of this brief episode, when realizing that he forgot his rifle in the jungle, Houston reluctantly returns to the site of the failed hunting. Strangely, the body of the monkey is gone and nowhere to be found, as if the accident never happened. However, the narrator foretells that the traumatic memory of the dying monkey will haunt the young American for the rest of his life: "Yet he [Houston] understood, without much alarm or unease, that he wouldn't be spared this sight forever" (8). Likewise, asserts Johnson, America would never be spared the memories of the Vietnam War.

The scenes of appalling killing and destruction caused by American military operations in Vietnam have been recorded and narrated through various media, and have left deep, persistent scars in America's national history. The aerial footage of US napalm bombing that were repeatedly broadcast on the television both during and after the war, Nick Ut's Pulitzer Prize-winning photo of nine year old Phan Thi Kim Phuc, severely

burnt on her back, crying, and running naked on a road near the village of Trang Bang, Seymour Hersh's exposé in *The New York Times* that uncovered US soldiers' mass murder of between 347 and 504 unarmed Vietnamese civilians in the hamlets of My Lai and My Khe, and Ronald Haeberle's photos of the incident—all those disturbing events and various others, recorded and circulated by the media, recreated and narrated through various cultural representations, have become the iconic representations of the Vietnam War that constantly reminds Americans of the tragic consequences and the moral ambiguity of their foreign interventionism. In other words, as a number of scholars and writers, including those examined in the previous chapters, have already demonstrated, the experiences of the war have thus compelled Americans to question their shared myths of America's innocence, good wars, and heroic soldiers—especially those derived from the nation's frontier past that have deeply been inscribed in American culture, and with which mainstream, white Americans, in particular, have constructed the self-images of their own country. By presenting the young Marine's "murder" of an ape as symbolic of his country's misconduct in Vietnam, Johnson once again reminds Americans of the historical facts of violence committed by their own state, and invites them to reconsider the legitimacy of the discourse upheld by their leaders that defines the nation's history as characterized by its commitments to good wars, the advancement of freedom and

democracy.

Johnson's attempts to undermine this particularly American ideological formation called the frontier myth, therefore, might not be so new and original, when one places him amongst the best authors of preceding US Vietnam War accounts such as O'Brien, Butler and Wright. However, it indeed is an endeavour highly relevant to the situations that contemporary US society has been facing. For, despite many authors' attempts to embed in the public's mind America's tragic errors in Vietnam, the memories of the war have always been a site of contestation wherein people try to reinterpret, rewrite, or revise the history in ways favourable to their own politico–historical perspectives.<sup>200</sup>

Surveying America's on-going struggle to understand the meaning of the Vietnam War since the mid–1960s, historians Robert J. McMahon and Philip E. Catton agree that while early assessment of the conflict by notable journalists and historians was almost unanimously highly critical of US interventionism, since the late 1970s, what McMahon calls “a conservative revisionism,” which accuses US military and civilian leaders of the Vietnam period for “fail[ing] to achieve politico–military objectives in Vietnam,” but

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<sup>200</sup> See Andrew Priest, “The Rhetoric of Revisionism: Presidential Rhetoric about the Vietnam War since 9/11,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* Vol. 43, No. 3 (September 2013): 538–561. Phillip E. Catton, “Refighting Vietnam in the History Books: The Historiography of the War,” *OAH Magazine of History*, Vol. 18, No. 5 (October 2004): 7–11. Robert J. McMahon, “Contested Memory: the Vietnam War and American Society, 1975–2001,” *Diplomatic History* Vol. 26, No. 2 (Spring 2002): 159–184. Robert McMahon, “Vietnam War (1960–75): Changing Interpretations,” *Oxford Companion to American Military History*, ed. John Whiteclay Chambers II (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 767–768.

which nonetheless works to vindicate America's military intervention in Indochina as a righteous mission to protect Asia from the communists' terror, has gained considerable attention.<sup>201</sup> A number of revisionists—including academics Harry G. Summers and Geunter Lewy as well as popular revisionists such as former president Richard Nixon and former commander of American forces in Vietnam William C. Westmoreland—have, in general, argued that the war was both winnable and justifiable, and that the United States failed to fulfil its mission, only because the successive administrations' lack of understanding of the realities of the battlefield, and the public's anti-war sentiment disseminated by the media prevented the armed forces from gaining necessary support to counter their enemy. According to McMahon and Andrew Priest, despite the seeming differences and disagreements in their analytical details, revisionists nevertheless share some common rhetoric that serve to turn the morally ambiguous interventionism into another just American war. In sum, revisionists' rhetoric conflates the heroic sacrifices demonstrated by individual US soldiers in Vietnam with the United States' conduct in a broader context, and thus defines the war as America's noble efforts equivalent to its past good wars such as World War II, while dismissing the more troublesome aspects of the United States' military interventionism in Indochina.<sup>202</sup>

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<sup>201</sup> McMahon, "Vietnam War" 767–68.

<sup>202</sup> McMahon, "Contested Memory" 164–72. Priest 539–40.

It should be noted that, although successive US presidents since Gerald R. Ford apparently differ in their politico–historical standpoints, they have, to varying degrees, adopted revisionist types of rhetoric, and used the memories of the war in ways that enabled them to publicly justify their own foreign military interventionism. For instance, McMahon suggests that both George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton appropriated the Vietnam War “as an useful referential point when it appeared politically advantageous to do so.”<sup>203</sup> Bush frequently referred to the Vietnam War as “an example of what not to do during the Persian Gulf crisis of 1990–1991,”<sup>204</sup> and his remark—“By God, we finally kicked the Vietnam Syndrome once and for all”<sup>205</sup>—stated after the successful ending of the war against Iraq, has become one of his most famous quotes. Among the list of Bush’s “what not to do” is giving the media the permission to carry out close combat reportage. Since, for the Bush administration, it was one of the factors that spread anti-war sentiment among the public, and that thus prevented the US Armed Forces gaining the necessary backup to win in Vietnam. Clinton, in turn, also constantly “used Vietnam as a point of reference in explaining why the United States was, or was not,

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<sup>203</sup> McMahon, “Contested Memory” 170.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid 170.

<sup>205</sup> George H. W. Bush (1991, March 1), “Remarks to the American Legislative Exchange Council,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*, George Bush Presidential Library, 20 September 2013  
<[http://bushlibrary.tamu.edu/research/public\\_papers.php?id=2754&year=1991&month=3](http://bushlibrary.tamu.edu/research/public_papers.php?id=2754&year=1991&month=3)>.

willing to intervene in Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo” and so forth.<sup>206</sup> Furthermore, McMahon argues that in his speech delivered in July 1995 that announced the normalization of US–Vietnam relationship, Clinton wholeheartedly embraced the revisionist rhetoric in that he “stressed the importance of honoring veterans of war while moving ‘beyond the haunting and painful past,’” and that he deliberately mingled the heroism and “noble motives” of individual soldiers with the nation’s purposes in the war at large.<sup>207</sup> These instances testify to the great extent to which the revisionists’ discourse of the Vietnam War’s history has established itself in the arena of American political mainstream. And significantly, what is at stake in this situation is the opportunities to consider “what Americans might learn from the widespread societal discord and loss of faith that the prolonged conflict precipitated at home,” and to seriously deal with “the issue of American *responsibility* for the death and devastation that occurred throughout Indochina during the course of American involvement”<sup>208</sup>—the troubling aspects of the war that have been completely disregarded in the revisionists’ accounts of Vietnam.

Guenter Lewy’s dictum in his controversial *America in Vietnam* (1978)—“the sense of guilt created by the Vietnam War in the minds of many Americans is not warranted and that the charges of *officially condoned* illegal and grossly immoral

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<sup>206</sup> McMahon, “Contested Memory” 170.

<sup>207</sup> McMahon, “Contested Memory” 170.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid 171.

conducts are without substance”<sup>209</sup>—would aptly represents an aspect of US public’s attitude toward the legacy of the Vietnam War in the early 2000s, during which Johnson composed his massive Vietnam novel. As the book contains Lewy’s attack upon the Winter Soldier Investigation, in which John Kerry took part—a public event sponsored by the Vietnam Veterans Against the War [VVAW] in Detroit from 31 January 1971 to 2 February 1971 to publicize war crimes perpetrated by US military forces in Vietnam—the book was frequently cited by groups such as Swift Boat Veterans for Truth [SBVT] that supported George W. Bush’s re-election in the 2004 Presidential Election in their attempts to impugn Kerry’s involvement in “the war crimes disinformation campaign.”<sup>210</sup>

I will refrain from further elaborating upon SBVT’s polemics, but would suggest that the period of Johnson’s composition corresponded to the time during which the memories of the Vietnam War had once again become a site of nationwide contestation. In other words, it was the time when the incumbent Bush administration’s prolonged wars on terror in Afghanistan and Iraq invited a comparison with the Vietnam War, and when, in response to the public’s criticism that “President Bush was forgetting the lessons of Vietnam and the ‘Vietnam Syndrome’—caution against using military force abroad,”<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1980) vii.

<sup>210</sup> *Swift Vets and POWs for Truth* 20 August 2013 <<http://www.swiftvets.com/index.php?topic=WarCrimes>>. See also *Winter Soldier.com* 20 August 2013 <<http://www.wintersoldier.com/>>.

<sup>211</sup> Priest 539.

the president and his advocates “attempted to reappropriate Vietnam’s lesson for his rhetorical and ultimately practical purposes”<sup>212</sup> in an effort to endorse their own foreign interventionism. I would argue that Johnson constructed his version of the Vietnam War to challenge this part of the nation’s wilful amnesia, as it were, to dismiss the troublesome legacies of the war.

A reviewer of *Tree of Smoke* expresses his loss of interest in reading another book about America’s experiences in the Vietnam War: “But the truth is, I won’t read another book about the ’60s, because *Tree of Smoke* is old material, told in a fashion that is weirdly laconic and profoundly gung ho at the same time.”<sup>213</sup> The reviewer’s remark that “[w]e get so much of what we can remember” about the war, and that what Johnson attempts to portray in his big book is “old material” might contain an element of the truth about the present-day’s (over)abundance of US Vietnam War accounts. However, if there is any meaning in creating another book about Vietnam in the 2000s, it is to construct a narrative that challenges the willing acts of oblivion enacted by both political leaders and citizens. Written when, by once again appealing to the strong sense of victimhood and anger incited in the aftermath of 9/11, a significant part of the nation tried to forget the lessons of its Vietnam experiences, Johnson’s novel about the war is a

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<sup>212</sup> Priest 542.

<sup>213</sup> Tom Chiarella, “Denis Johnson killed the Sixties,” rev. of *Tree of Smoke* by Denis Johnson, *Esquire* 23 August 2007, 5 August 2013  
<<http://www.esquire.com/fiction/book-review/denisjohnson0907>>.



powerful reminder of America's troublesome legacies. Covering the time frame of twenty years since the assassination of JFK, and depicting the war through the multiple perspectives of characters moving about in the remote Asian terrain, it tries to speak of the aspects of the conflict that have often slipped from America's collective memories.

For Johnson's American characters, Vietnam in *Tree of Smoke* is a nightmarish landscape of betrayal and conspiracy wherein all their efforts of counterinsurgency end up in utter failure, often leading to calamitous disaster that would not have occurred, had there not been their presence in the first place. In other words, as I will examine in the following part of this chapter, in describing the dark side of America's recent history as well as in questioning the authorities' optimistic faith in their nation's exceptional goodness, Johnson too, like O'Brien, describes the Vietnamese terrain as an inverted American frontier seen through a distorted mirror. In this remote Southeast Asian country, wherein US soldiers strive to fulfil their mission, America's heroic, triumphal adventures promised in its myth are completely subverted.

In addition, equally important in examining Johnson's efforts to challenge US collective amnesia are his attempts to include Vietnamese people's perspective in their narratives. As already surmised above, in their efforts to understand America's experiences in Vietnam, both US political leaders, military specialists, and civilian

researchers have often failed to deal with the issues of the United States' responsibility for the loss that the Vietnamese people suffered during the course of America's involvement in the conflict. It should be noted that it is also true of the case of US creative writers' accounts of the war. As Renny Christopher argues, American stories of the war almost exclusively narrate the themes of GIs' suffering and seldom speak of the tribulations of the Vietnamese people.<sup>214</sup> A few notable writers such as O'Brien and Butler, whose works I have examined in the previous chapters, have attempted to include the Vietnamese perspectives in their narrative. It should, nevertheless, be pointed out that the efforts on the part of American authors to acknowledge the Vietnamese people's pain are still scarce, in proportion to the great number of Vietnam fictions published since the mid-1970s. As already mentioned above, one of the stylistic virtues of Johnson's enormous Vietnam War novel is its inclusion of more than a dozen focal characters of diverse backgrounds that enables the author to narrate America's involvement in the conflict from multiple angles. Along with the novel's central American characters such as Skip Sands, an inchoate CIA agent, and James Houston, an Army private and the younger brother of William Houston, Johnson traces the fates of several Vietnamese characters both during and after the war, thereby narrating the dire consequences of

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<sup>214</sup> Renny Christopher, *The Viet Nam War The American War: Images and Representations in Euro-American and Vietnamese Exile Narratives* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995) 1–23.

American military interventionism in Vietnam from their perspectives too. In this way, by focusing upon the Vietnamese characters whose lives are irrevocably altered by American intervention in Indochinese conflict, Johnson tries to incorporate in his narrative the voices that have often been neglected in American accounts of the war. A close reading of *Tree of Smoke* thus leads us to investigate one of America's latest attempts to empathically deal with the issues of the Vietnamese people's suffering.

### **Murdering the Myth of America's Cultural Fathers**

As mentioned above, Johnson's *Tree of Smoke* narrates the Vietnam War and its consequences to the lives of numerous individuals involved therein, by tracing the actions of multiple characters possessing different backgrounds. Accordingly, each character's experience in the war considerably differs from others, depending on his or her unique standpoint. Johnson's novel thus requires one to carefully pick up each character's narrative thread, to scrutinize the ways in which it is woven into the complex tapestry of the author's prolonged Vietnam War chronicle, entwined with other threads, and at times changing the effects of its colour and contour when seen at different angles. When focusing upon the fates of its central American characters, however, one can argue that the novel, throughout its entire timeframe of the two decades beginning in 1963, in essence figuratively reiterates the two incidents taking place in the very beginning of the story—JKF's assassination and the fresh Marine's failed hunting experience in

Southeast Asian jungle. Although taken up by different individuals, the American characters' actions in the novel always lead to represent the themes of America's loss of innocence and its people's disillusionment with their national myth. The only difference extant between the earlier and the following scenes is the increasingly despairing tone with which Johnson writes the latter. Repeated throughout the novel, Johnson's nightmarish visions of upturned frontier mythology seem to announce a total breakdown of America's faith in the myth of its essential goodness and might.

A close examination of the story of James Houston, Bill Houston's younger brother, will aptly demonstrate the identical narrative pattern that Johnson persistently retells in the novel. After his first post in Philippines' Grand Island, during which he killed a crying ape, Bill moves across several Asian waters as a member of the Marines, but in no way he experiences exciting adventures that he initially sought in the exotic landscapes. Instead, what he goes through is a gradual process of disenchantment with America's military missions abroad. Bill does not achieve any sorts of military feats, but rather he has been demoted twice for the troubles he caused during his service, and ends up being "assigned to grunt work and garbage detail on the base in Yokosuka Japan, mostly with rowdy black men, low-aptitude morons, and worthless bust-outs like himself," before eventually being discharged from Marine Corps and deported to the

States (138). Bill's anti-heroic journey thus presents the prosaic reality of soldiers' lives abroad that contradicts the stories of good and tough American warriors romanticized and reproduced through the media. While Bill leaves the Marines and returns home, only to lead a tedious, mundane life as a poor working-class man like his parents, James takes over his brother's failed adventure in Asian terrains. In ways much similar to his older brother, James is discontented with his life in the suburb of the Southeastern big city, its boredom, and the unpromising future prospects that it can only offer. Like "a number of papers from school, homework, report card, year-end bulletins" that he throws away in the trashcan under the sink, James dismisses things and people related to his hometown—high school, his girlfriend, hardworking, pious mother, and delinquent younger brother—as symbolic of his bleak future in the United States, and enlists in the Army to serve in Vietnam when he is only seventeen, by bringing to the recruitment office a lying birth certificate (121).

While Bill's journey to overseas waters is narrated in a manner that combines the tragic and the comic, James's peregrination across the Vietnamese landscape is portrayed in decidedly darker, gloomier tints, although it repeats the identical pattern of storytelling that traces an American youth's life from his initial infatuation with the romanticized images of the military and its missions overseas to his eventual disillusionment with

America's foreign interventionism. Upon arriving at Vietnam and after going through a brief period of acute homesickness, James meets Sergeant Harmon, a veteran of Korean War. To James, Harmon, who is "older and ha[s] these war-movie looks—very light blond hair, sky-blue eyes, and a tanned face, and a grin that crawled up on one side like Elvis Presley's," represents the very ideal of a good and mighty American soldier (235). He has the appearance of the heroic GIs and officers in popular WW II movies that James must have seen and been fascinated with in his early youth, and James's impression that the Sergeant's grin looks like Presley's signifies the young GI's admiration for him—one that closely resembles adolescents' naïve admiration for pop stars. As such, as soon as seeing him in person, James regards Harman as his role model for soldiering, and as his reverence for the middle-aged, robust and NCO is so strong that he even desires to imitate an apparent flaw in his appearance: James finds that one of Harmon's dog teeth is chipped, but as "his teeth [are] very white and it d[oes]n't look that bad," the narrator explains that "James almost felt that he wouldn't mind having a tooth chipped like that" (235).

It should be noted that if, in Bill's storyline, the fresh Marine's attempt to hunt a wild boar in the exotic rainforest signifies his desire to demonstrate his manhood commensurate with that of America's mythic warriors, in James's story, his efforts to

emulate Harmon is also indicative of his wish to enter the world of the myth. For, in James's eyes, Harmon, bearing the semblance of "war-movie" soldiers, embodies the heroism and masculinity of US military personnel idealized in the mythic representations of America's past wars. As if his wish to identify himself with America's masculine fighters is understood by his comrades, James is nicknamed "cowboy,"<sup>215</sup> the images of which Roosevelt romanticized as a legitimate successor to the early Anglo-Saxon immigrants to the New World frontier, and also the precursor or equivalent of heroic American soldiers fighting overseas.<sup>216</sup> In this respect, Johnson's story of the Houston brothers—in much the same way as "the realistic novels and memoir of" Philip Caputo, Rob Kovic, Tim O'Brien, and others published during the seventies and early eighties—also narrates "a common tale in which the youthful protagonist leaves behind the society of his immediate father to connect with the cultural father by entering the frontier in Vietnam."<sup>217</sup> Indeed, both Bill and James leave the society of their immediate parent—Phoenix, Arizona, with its tedium and the closed opportunities—to enter Asian frontier landscape, where their "cultural father," heroic American soldiers such as Sergeant Harmon, courageously fight against the evil Communists. After setting his foot in Vietnam, however, the hero of the earlier US Vietnam War accounts, as John

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<sup>215</sup> Johnson 217.

<sup>216</sup> Slotkin 36–42.

<sup>217</sup> John Hellman, *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986) 161.

Hellmann argues, “suffers the traumatic shock of finding that he has instead entered a crazy landscape of American myth frustrating all of his expectations.”<sup>218</sup> One can argue that it is also true of Johnson’s American characters. Bill’s attempt to follow in the footsteps of earlier American soldiers abroad fails, and what he faces in remote Asian terrains are the menial chores of fatigue duty and his own incompetence. When James starts his military service in Vietnam in 1966, however, the story gradually loses its comic aspects and begins to be filled with numerous acts of brutal violence that drives the young American to insanity.

It should be noted that Johnson, in particular, narrates Tet Offensive—one of the largest joint military campaigns by North Vietnamese Army and NLF forces that launched massive surprise attacks upon important American commands in South Vietnam in the early morning of 30 January 1968, the lunar New Year Day, and that “had an electric effect on popular opinion [about the war] in the United States”<sup>219</sup>—as a significant event in the novel that also changed the course of several central American characters’ lives thereafter. Frances Fitzgerald explains that the horrible scenes of violence, such as “the pictures of corpses in the garden of American embassy” and “fighting in the cities” that newspapers and television reported “brought the shock of

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<sup>218</sup> Hellmann 161.

<sup>219</sup> Frances Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake: the Vietnamese and Americans in Vietnam* (New York and London: Back Bay Books, 2002) 393.



reality to what was still for many Americans a distant and incomprehensible war.”<sup>220</sup>

Further to this point, as those disturbing images of the conflict gave “flat contradiction to the official optimism about slow but steady progress of the war,”<sup>221</sup> the nation’s major newsmagazines as well as TV commentators started to openly criticize the government’s policy in the war, and they consequently fuelled the public’s anti-war sentiment. James is one of the novel’s central American characters whose course of life is drastically altered as a result of the enemy’s surprise attack. In particular, that year’s Tet is described as a traumatic event that marks James’s loss of innocence and his faith in the myth of America’s good wars. However, whereas the then US public was largely persuaded into disbelieving the government’s propaganda, and at times expressing their protest against America’s military intervention in Vietnam by knowing the appalling realities of the war, James, in contrast, is driven to ever greater madness that completely transforms him into a ruthless killer insensitive to the pains of others.

James’s disillusionment with America’s myth of good wars and heroic soldiers occurs in Tet Offensive, taking the form of the destruction of the body of Sergeant Harmon, his cultural father. In the small hours of Tet, the US Army base near a small village called Cao Phuc, where James serves, is suddenly attacked by the enemy’s fire. In

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<sup>220</sup> Fitzgerald 394.

<sup>221</sup> Fitzgerald 394.

the midst of the utter confusion brought about by the NLF's massive surprise attack, James joins a group of GIs, led by Harmon, in his desperate attempt to escape the heavy fire. Somehow James survives the crisis, but, to his dismay, finds out that Harmon has been shot and severely wounded in the neck. In war movies and popular combat romances that James and numerous other American youth of his generation have been familiarized with, the soldier hero/protagonist never dies in combat zone, or even if he dies, like John Wayne's Sergeant John M. Striker in *The Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949), what he goes through is a heroic death that makes their fame immortal. However, what James sees in the fact of Harmon's injuring is merely the gruesome sight of open body, and the pain and agony of the wounded soldier—the distressing realities of war that have rarely been portrayed in romanticized tales of combat. The narrator describes the scene of Harmon's injuring from a perspective quite close to James's as follows:

He [James] heard the big gun ahead and scrambled on elbows and knees towards it. Rounds ticked through the leaves on all sides of him. Somebody was hurt, bawling, howling, without letup. Just ahead, a guy kneeling with his helmet shut off, scalped by a head wound—no, it was the hippie doc with his kerchief tied around his head, a couple morphine syrettes clamped between his lips like a cigarettes while he knelt over the screamer, who was the sarge. “Sarge, Sarge, Sarge!” James said. “Good, good, talk to him, don’t let him go,” the doc said and bit a syrette and drove the point right into Sarge’s neck. But the sarge kept bawling like an infant, emptying and filling his lung over and over. (288)

Freely going back and forth between the objective third person narration and the free

indirect speech that delves into James's point of view, Johnson aptly describes the extremely tense situation of close combat and the confused vision of the GIs moving about therein. What is more significant in this scene, however, is the great emotional shock that James suffers, facing the disturbing sight of Harmon's destructed body. Although James has always thought of Harmon as strong, imperturbable, and reliable—when he finds himself and a few other comrades joined with the sergeant during the confusion of Tet Offensive, James believes that “they [are] saved”<sup>222</sup>—now the NCO is helplessly lying on the ground, unable to take any actions that could even save his own life. The sight in which the once beautiful sergeant “k[eeeps] bawling like an infant” sharply contradicts the images of heroic soldiers that James has associated with Harmon, thereby confronting him with the disturbing, but absolute truth of combat: the heroic adventures portrayed in war movies of his youth are false, and war destructs the human body, psyche, and integrity in most inhuman ways imaginable. Although Harmon's life is saved, the damage has forced him into suffering a serious vegetative state. When James visit him in the hospital, he finds out that the sergeant, whose beautifully masculine looks he once admired, “looked like the Frankenstein monster laid out in pieces, wired up for the jolt that would wake him to a monster's confused tortured finish” (321). The brutal shock that James experiences in seeing Harmon's predicament is epitomized in the

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<sup>222</sup> Johnson 287.

remark that he imagines the debilitated sergeant addressing to him, when he is about to leave the hospital: “I’m a mess” (323).

In this way, like the mangled, eternally disabled body of Harmon, James’s illusion of the war as great opportunities to experience regeneration through violence and to identify himself with America’s mythic heroes is completely shattered to pieces. Ron Kovic—the author and the protagonist of his Vietnam War memoir, *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976)—who had suffered serious wound similar to Harmon that made his body paralyzed down from the chest—has made himself into a vehement anti-war activist, once he became disillusioned with the myth of America’s missions overseas romanticized in popular discourses. James’s life after knowing Harmon’s plight, however, draws a trajectory quite contrary to Kovic’s. In the morning after the US Army managed to suppress the enemy’s attack, James joins a soldier who tortures a Vietcong suspect captured during the firefight. In the discussions following this, I will once again return to this scene of the torturing/killing of a NLF soldier, as it is a significant moment in the novel at which James and two other American characters’ lives intersect. Thus, here it would suffice to suggest that the episode represents a significant part of Johnson’s attempts to create his anti-frontier Vietnam novel. For this scene, wherein a GI nicknamed as “cowboy” supports the torturing of an enemy, one of the most brutal war

crimes, sharply contradicts the images of the tough, but good and honest GIs mythologized in American war stories and movies. Thereafter, James is further driven into the perpetration of atrocious violence in warzone, as if his transformation into a cold-hearted killer is symbolic of the excessive violence that the United States directed against Vietnam. He continues to renew his military service four times in Vietnam, until finally in 1970 he is discharged from the Army and deported to the States on the charges of the raping and killing of a Vietcong female soldier (517). James's initial admiration for America's good soldiers and his wish to identify with them are thus subverted by the end of his journey across Vietnam, and the ensuing deterioration of his morale and the acts of irrational violence that he commits during the final period of his service, inevitably evoking the traumatic memories of America's war crimes such as the My Lai massacre, represents Johnson's pessimistic vision of what America has become of through its Vietnam War experiences.

Among the more than a dozen central characters in *Tree of Smoke*, if one is to choose an individual who can be called the protagonist of the story, it would probably be Skip Sands, an inchoate CIA agent from Kansas, working under the command of his uncle Francis Xavier Sands, alias the colonel, who is an experienced, senior CIA agent. In ways quite similar to those of Houston brothers, Skip's journey across Southeast

Asian landscapes also follows the identical pattern of story that traces the character's life from his initial, naïve fascination with America's military missions abroad, through a traumatic experience in the warzone that entirely changes the course of his life, to the total disintegration of his personality awaiting in the end. In Skip's case, however, his admiration for America's cultural fathers and desire to re-enact their heroic adventures is more obvious than the former two. Born in a family several of whose paternal male relatives are military servicemen who fought for America's past wars, Skip has always aspired to become a strong American hero as dedicated as them to the country's missions to spread democracy and free economy through the world. The narrator explains that during his childhood and early youth, he used to visit Boston in summer to stay with his father's side of the family, whereupon he was surrounded by "an Irish horde of big cops and veteran guard dogs, and their worried poodle wives," and that "His Boston Irish uncles had shown Skip who to become, had marked out the shape he'd fill someday as a grown man" (37). His own late father is a casualty of Pearl Harbor, a sailor serving on USS *Arizona* who was killed during Japanese attack on 7 December 1941. Thus, to Skip, who somewhat naively "love[s] the dirty, plain, honest faces of GIs in the photographs of World War II," and who possesses a strong desire to follow in their footsteps, his father seems to belong to the world of the myth of America's good wars that he believes in, as

one of the self-sacrificing US soldiers who heroically fought and died for the nation's noble cause to battle the Fascists' threats (64).

Among his Bostonian uncles, Skip, in particular, admires Francis Sands, both as an immediate role model for his future as well as a larger-than-life individual who, like his father, exists in the world of America's national myth of its past just wars. Francis is also a veteran of WW II, during which he fought against the Japanese in Chinese and Burmese terrains as a pilot of the legendary Flying Tigers, and, when shot down and captured by the enemy, accomplished the remarkable feat of escaping from the notorious Japanese prison camp in Burma. After the successful closure of WW II, Francis has continued to serve in Southeast Asian terrains to join America's prolonged efforts to suppress the spread of Communism therein. One can argue that the fact that Francis fought against the Huks' uprising in the Philippines under the command of Colonel Edward Lansdale, a champion of US aggressive actions in Cold War, typically bespeaks Johnson's intention to create the character of Francis as one that, in Skip's eyes, embodies the images of tough, devout, and good American soldiers worshipped in the popular narratives of America's military missions abroad. For, as Richard Drinnon argues, Colonel Lansdale, whom Francis respects as "an exemplary human being,"<sup>223</sup> is a model of Colonel Edwin Hillandale, alias the Ragtime Kid—one of the genuinely

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<sup>223</sup> Johnson 49.

heroic Americans in Eugene Burdick's and William Lederer's *The Ugly American*.<sup>224</sup> As evident in the Colonel's frequent remarks about the outstanding personality and tactics of his former commander, Johnson deliberately portrays Francis's character as an experienced CIA agent, who inherits Lansdale's unorthodox guerrilla counterinsurgency strategies, and who attempts to transplant them into America's current battle against the NLF and the NVA. Therefore, for Skip, Francis is not merely a close kin and a model for his immediate future career, but also an outstanding personage who belongs to the realm of the national myth and legend. As the narrator explains, learning his uncle's great military feats throughout his early youth, "Skip ha[s] made Sands a personal legend" (47). Thus, when Skip regards his uncle as "mountainous" in spite of his short height, he not only describes Francis's sturdy physique—his "barrel chested and potbellied [...] sunburned" body and "a head like an anvil"—but also expresses his great awe for "the power of history"—"missions for Flying Tigers in Burma, antiguerrilla operations [...] with Edward Lansdale"—that surrounds his uncle with a mythic aura (45).

Lansdale's unorthodox styles of counterinsurgency, epitomized by what Francis describes as "trust[ing] the locals, learn[ing] their songs and stories, fight[ing] for their hearts and minds," are romantically incarnated in the character of The Ragtime Kid in

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<sup>224</sup> Richard Drinnon, *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian Hating and Empire Building* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980) 377–380.



Burdick–Lederer’s *The Ugly American* (449). As Drinnon argues, the authors depict The Ragtime Kid as “a sort of twentieth-century reincarnation of Johnny Appleseed, warning folks against modern merciless savages and handing out the seeds and saplings of American democracy.”<sup>225</sup> Carrying his harmonica with which he cheerfully plays jazz and native tunes, and with his mastery in Tagalog as well as his great love for the culture, the food, and the people of Philippines, Hillandale is always able to win the hearts of the locals, demonstrate America’s good intentions, and dispel the evil thoughts that Communists have cunningly insinuated into the minds of the innocent Filipino people. Nevertheless, although Burdick and Lederer portray Hillandale as a “happy-go-lucky character”<sup>226</sup> who sympathizes deeply with the indigenous Filipino people, heroically striving to solve their predicament, Drinnon contends that detailed researches in Cold War history and a close reading of the former colonel’s memoir suggest that Lansdale’s character and his strategies, in real life, were profoundly different from his fictional persona and its actions.<sup>227</sup> In the first place, Lansdale’s understanding of the culture and

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<sup>225</sup> Drinnon 378.

<sup>226</sup> Drinnon 378.

<sup>227</sup> The following brief explanation of Lansdale’s counterinsurgency operations in the Philippines largely relies upon Drinnon’s analysis in the chapters XXV and XXVI (pp. 380–401) of his *Facing West*. For further information about Lansdale’s persona and his actions, see Joseph Burkholder Smith, *Portrait of a Cold War Warrior* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1976). Also see Lansdale’s memoir, Edward Geary Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars: An American’s mission to Southeast Asia* (New York: Harpers & Row, 1972). For a detailed study of the Huks’ rebellion, see Benedict J. Kerkvliet, *The Huk Rebellion: A Study of Peasant Revolt in the Philippines* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977).

history of the local people was incomplete and even skewed. Lansdale identified the Huks with the Communists and represented their rebellion as one of the major Communist terrors spreading in the Asian Third World. However, the Huks, in reality, mostly consisted of landless peasants who had long been exploited by their successive colonialists and the elite Filipinos, the then collaborators with the Americans, and were not, in essence, associated with the Philippine Communist Party, save for some occasional cooperative campaigns. Lansdale dismissed their cause of abolishing social inequality as “Communist-inspired,” and used his partial theory to authorize America’s military actions to suppress the Huks’ uprisings. In addition, in ways quite contrary to Hillandale’s cheerful character and his great respect for the Filipino people, his real-life model adopted—with his Filipino cohorts such as the then Secretary of Defense Ramon Magsaysay and Colonel Napoleon Valeriano—campaigns that in every way “violated all the written and unwritten laws of land warfare,” including torturing and killing of innocent peasants.<sup>228</sup>

If Burdick–Lederer’s Hillandale is a fictional incarnation of Edward Lansdale idealized in ways that mask America’s illicit violent actions in Southeast Asia, Johnson’s Francis personifies the rather darker sides of Lansdale’s theory and campaigns, the aspects utterly unsuited to preserve the public image of the legendary Cold War warrior.

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<sup>228</sup> Drinnon 394.

Johnson's Colonel Sand, like Lansdale himself, turns out to be quite dismissive of the culture and history of the local people living in Vietnam. Francis's own opinions about the situation of the conflict in Vietnam and America's role therein are summarized in the following remark that he addresses to Skip in an earlier part of the novel:

"This isn't a Cold War, Skip. It's World War Three." [...] "We are in a worldwide war, have been for close to twenty years. [...] It's a covert World War Three. It's Armageddon by proxy. It's a contest between good and evil, and its true ground is the heart of every human. [...] I'm going to tell you, Skip: sometimes I wonder if it isn't the goddamn Alamo. This is a fallen world. Every time we turn around there's someone else going Red." (57)

It should be noted that Francis describes the present state of affairs in Vietnam in terms that resonate with America's own mythic interpretation of world history. By regarding America's military campaigns to "contain" the spread of Communism in the Asian Third World countries as "World War Three," Francis attempts to interpret the US's current involvement in Vietnam as an updated version of America's righteous missions in WW II. His peculiar framework totally disregards the historical background of Vietnamese people's rebellion, and, in turn, relegates the complex realities of the conflict into a simplistic binarism of a "contest between good and evil." Whereupon, in a manner that evokes the rhetoric of President George W. Bush's war on terror, the US interventionism in Indochina is almost automatically vindicated as a war for justice, and its morally ambiguous aspects and the terrible consequences of US military operations are dismissed

as trivial.<sup>229</sup>

In addition, it is also worth noting that Francis mentions the Battle of the Alamo as a significant point of reference in history that is apt for understanding the current crisis that America and its allies face: the ever-spreading Communist influence over Southeast Asian terrains. As a momentous event taking place in the time of America's westward expansion, the battle has frequently been retold in films since the 1930s, wherein the Anglo-American soldiers' fierce fighting against the massive Mexican troops are often portrayed/admired as the nation's mythic fathers' selfless, heroic efforts to defend freedom and democracy that contemporary Americans have to emulate. In particular, as Slotkin discusses, *The Alamo* (1960), in which John Wayne starred as Davy Crockett, is one of the blockbuster epics produced between 1960 and 1965 "whose scale and ideological ambition mirrored the sense of world-mission that informed the New Frontier."<sup>230</sup> Romanticizing the Anglo-American warriors' self-sacrificial efforts and "the hero's martyrdom," the film "promulgated the worldview that closely corresponded

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<sup>229</sup> For the full transcript of President Bush's address on the United States' war on terror, see George W. Bush (20 September 2001), "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the United States Response to the Terrorist Attacks of September 11," *The American Presidency Project*, 10 November 2013 <<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=64731&st=&st1=>>. It should also be noted that President Bush himself likened his war on terror campaigns to WW III in an interview. "Bush Likens War on Terror to WW III," *ABC News Online*, 06 May 2006, 10 November 2013 <<http://web.archive.org/web/20110204112337/http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200605/s1632213.htm>>.

<sup>230</sup> Slotkin 504.

to Kennedy's sense of America's place in the world as a noble and strong, but sorely beleaguered, in a 'darkened' and hostile political environment."<sup>231</sup> Referring to Wayne's remark, Slotkin further contends that Wayne produced the film, hoping that it "would play a role in the struggle against Communism in the emerging nations, that through it he could 'sell America to countries threatened with Communist domination [...] [and] put a new heart and faith into all the world's free people,'" and that, more than anything, the film would incite the strong senses of patriotism and America's world mission in the minds of contemporary Americans who had "all been going soft, taking the freedom for granted."<sup>232</sup> In much the same way as Wayne, Francis uses the popular discourse of American frontier mythology to endorse America's current counterinsurgency campaigns in Vietnam. In other words, ignoring the differences extant between the two different cultures, and imposing upon the land and the people of Vietnam the worldview that glorifies America's expansionism, Francis, in effect, describe the land of Vietnam as an extension of the American western frontier. In this, one can argue that Francis—a seasoned Cold War warrior and the protagonist's cultural father—is blind to the complex realities of Vietnam as ineptly as Bill Houston—an inexperienced, fresh Marine—in that both uncritically rely on the ethnocentric framework of the frontier

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<sup>231</sup> Slotkin 505.

<sup>232</sup> Slotkin 515–16.

myth to interpret the culture and history of Southeast Asia.

In Vietnam, as the head of Psychological Operations for the CIA in Southeast Asia, Francis, with a small coterie of his henchmen including his nephew Skip, undertakes an operation called “Tree of Smoke,” which he himself describes as “a self-authorized national deception operation,” without obtaining the approval of the CIA headquarters at home (337). Employing a Vietnamese double agent, the operation aims to inform Ho Chi Minh and the leaders of NLF and NVA with false intelligence that the United States plans to attack the city of Hanoi with nuclear missiles, and, hereby, to demoralize the enemy. Thus, in his private campaign, the “true ground” of the war is “the heart of every human”: deceiving both the regular US Armed Forces and the Vietnamese foes, Francis attempts to re-enact Lansdale’s notorious psychological warfare in the Philippines, with which he endeavours to “penetrate their [the Vietnamese people’s] national soul” (194).<sup>233</sup> Francis’s unorthodox styles of fighting and his use of deception as effective means to counter the enemy not only reminds one of his immediate predecessor Lansdale, but also other legendary fighters of American popular combat romances that include Wayne’s Davy Crocket in *The Alamo* and the Special Forces men in Robin Moore’s *The*

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<sup>233</sup> Based upon a study of the local folklores and superstitions, Lansdale and his Filipino counterparts launched “psywar [psychological warfare]” campaigns to demoralize the enemy guerillas. Their operations include broadcasting “mysterious Tagalog curses on villagers who dared support the rebels,” posting “[printed] baleful starring eyes” in their villages, and displaying the corpses of captured rebels killed in the fashion of “aswang”—vampire—witches appearing in the local lore. See Drinnon 393–94.

*Green Berets*, among others.<sup>234</sup> Nevertheless, Johnson portrays Francis and his covert operation as being utterly incapable of solving the difficulties that Americans face in Vietnam. Instead of narrating the protagonists' actions in romantic manners that authorize US military campaigns overseas, Johnson recounts an anti-heroic tale in which Skip witnesses Francis's disastrous failures in his attempts to penetrate the Vietnamese national soul. Whereupon, the author tries to delineate what he deems to be the more accurate version of the truths of America's interventionism in Vietnam.

The assassination of Father Thomas Carignan, in which Skip at first unknowingly takes part, is one of the telling examples of the colonel's blunders. Under instruction from Francis, Skip's main job in Southeast Asian terrains is to maintain over nineteen thousand entries of people's names and personal details printed in the same number of three-by-five cards that are kept in a dozen narrow wooden drawers. As being "the

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<sup>234</sup> In recruiting otherwise reluctant Tennesseans for his campaign to battle against the Mexican troops, Wayne's Crockett at first deceives them into believing that they are merely going to hunting. Analyzing the ways in which that the protagonist's such deceptive actions are justified in the film, Slotkin argues that "The politics of *The Alamo* [...] mirror the emerging politics of [American] counterinsurgency in their insistence on the legitimacy of falsification and manipulation to evade (until commitment is an established fact) a skeptical public scrutiny [...]." See Slotkin 517. Almost all the American heroes appearing in Moore's *The Green Berets* adopt tactics of deception as necessary, useful means to defeat the NLF. Take the episode of Sergeant Ossidian for instance. In the episode, Ossidian and a group of Special Forces men use Co Binh—a beautiful Vietnamese female, whose family was brutally murdered by the NLF—to trick a lascivious NLF commander into kidnapping. It would not be a mere coincidence that, eight years after *The Alamo*, when the public's support for US intervention in Vietnam had begun to wane drastically, Wayne—a strong advocate of America's aggressive actions in Vietnam—cinematized the novel in the hope of once again reviving the public's enthusiasm for the war. Wayne used Ossidian's story as a closing episode of the film. See Robin Moore, *The Green Berets* (New York: Avon Books, 1965) 107–142.

colonel's private intelligence library," the entire card catalogue system is the cache of the data of individuals related to Francis's as well as his enemy's covert activities (47). One day in 1965, Skip is ordered to go to Mindanao to "finalize" the file of Father Carignan, an American priest "off in the boonies," whose name is recorded in the colonel's card catalogue, and who allegedly transfers weapons to Muslim guerrilla groups in the island (62). Alternating Skip's perspective with the priest's, Johnson informs the reader that Carignan is in no ways a collaborator with Muslim guerrillas as Francis suspects him to be, but merely a civilian priest who works with/for the local Filipino peasants, struggling to keep his Christian faith in a cultural environment considerably different from his homeland. Toward the end of his trip, Skip witnesses the assassination of the priest carried out by Francis's two other partners, and later he finds out that Carignan had nothing to do with the Filipino rebels, and that his demise took place as a consequence of a grave mistake on the part of his uncle. Although covert execution of other individuals plotted by Francis does not appear on the surface of the plot, the over nineteen thousand entries contained in his card catalogue suggest the ominous possibility that the colonel's actions have entailed the murdering of numerous other civilians in Vietnam and beyond on account of his careless handling of intelligence. In this way, by recounting Skip's experiences in the colonel's erroneous, "self-authorized" campaigns, Johnson describes



the process through which the protagonist's naïve faith in America's goodness and might wavers in the face of his cultural father's inexcusable faults. The narrator explains that, in 1965 at the beginning of his tour, Skip firmly believes in the righteousness of his country and its missions in Southeast Asia: "He [Skip] consider[s] both the Agency and his country to be glorious" (37). However, further experiencing the frustrating failures of the colonel's project and witnessing what seems to be his aging uncle's physical as well as spiritual decline in the following years, Skip starts to cast doubt upon the old Cold War fighter's abilities. In 1968, when the colonel gives Skip the whole picture of his "Tree of Smoke" operation for the first time, Skip cannot help making the following observation, which Johnson delineates, using free-indirect speech to allow him to delve into the depth of his protagonist's consciousness: "And who could say the delirious old warrior [Francis] didn't grapple after actual truth? Intelligence, data, analysis be dammed; to hell with reason, categories, synthesis, common sense. All was ideology and imagery and conjuring" (345). It should be noted that here Skip's admiration for Francis as his great role model is considerably decreased compared with that three years ago: he suspects that his uncle's counterinsurgency campaigns are contrived using a false framework that does not "grapple after actual truth," and the great extent of Skip's disillusionment with the legendary hero of WW II is aptly articulated in the derogatory sobriquet that designates

him—“the delirious old warrior.” As Skip’s cultural father, Francis embodies the ideal of America’s myth of its good wars. Thus, for Skip, questioning his uncle’s authority is practically equal to casting doubt upon the legitimacy of the myth and America’s current involvement in the conflict in Vietnam.

As in the case of James Houston’s storyline, Johnson describes the Tet Offensive as the protagonist’s most traumatic event and one that forces him to call into question the worldview with which he has understood America’s identity and its role in the current world political situation, and that alters the course of the protagonist thereafter. Although Francis is already retired from the regular army, by means of his close connection with and strong influence over it garnered in previous wars, he plays the role of a commander, making full use of the military personnel of the Echo echelon posted in the US base near the village of Cao Phuc—the same one where James serves—in his own campaigns, as if they are his private troops. Skip also resides in a nearby cottage to support his uncle’s actions. In the morning following the enemy’s massive surprise attack, Skip return to the base by Francis’s helicopter, and thereupon witnesses a appalling scene of torturing/murdering of a Vietcong captive committed by the GIs and his own uncle. In arriving at the base, Skip finds out that an anonymous black soldier—a member of the echelon’s Lurps [long-range reconnaissance patrol] much feared among the GIs for their

extremely savage ways of fighting—who is known to them only by his moniker “Indian,” captured a NLF soldier who had attempted to shoot him during the battle. Presently, the black soldier begins to torture the captive, while another terribly angered GI called “Cowboy” (i.e. James Houston) yells and urges him to torment the prisoner. Meanwhile, no one, including Francis, dares to intervene to stop the GIs’ atrocious act:

One of the Lurps [...] the savagely dressed black guy, stood in a bloody puddle in front of the hanging prisoner, spitting in his face. [...] /The colonel observed from the shade, from a seat on an old connex crate shot full of holes, with chickens living in it. [...] /The black Kooty [an abbreviation for “Kootchy Kooties,” the Lurps’s sobriquet used among the GIs in the base] seemed to be lecturing them while he dug at the man’s belly with the blade of a multipurpose Swiss Army knife. [...] /“There’s something I want this sonabitching motherfucker to *see*.” Now the Kooty went at the man’s eyes with the spoon of his Swiss Army knife. /“Do it, do it,” Cowboy said. /“I want this motherfucker to get a real ... good ... look at something,” the Kooty said. “Oh, yeah. Sound like a baby girl,” he said in answer to the man’s scream. He dropped his knife in the gore at his feet and grabbed the man’s eyeballs hanging by their purple optic nerves and turned the red veiny side so that the pupils look back at the empty sockets and the pulp in the cranium. “Take a good look at yourself, you piece of shit.” [...] /The colonel hopped down off the connex crate and walked over to the scene unsnapping the flap on his holster and motioned Cowboy and the Kooty out of the way and shot the dangling prisoner in the temple. (296–97)

What Skip (and the reader) witness in this incident is not only the gruesome sight of the tortured man’s open body and agony, which, in itself, is disturbing enough to be reminded of the horrifying realities of the war. Equally important is the fact that, in this, Johnson consummates his nightmarish vision of an upturned frontier in which all the

conventional images of race preserved in America's myths of good wars and the frontier are completely subverted. It should be noted that in this scene "Cowboy"—a figure symbolic of the toughness and heroism of white American warriors enacted by James—and a savage "Indian,"—the cowboy's iniquitous foe impersonated by a black soldier—congregate to join in an evil, pagan ritual of touring another Indian, the Vietcong soldier. Furthermore, the one who executes the tortured prisoner is no other than Francis, who, as Skip's cultural father, personifies the myth of America's just wars and its courageous soldiers. Johnson evidently depicts the scene as a site of the protagonist's loss of innocence. Shortly after the Tet Offensive, remembering the traumatic incident that he saw therein, Skip thinks that he is no longer the person that he used to be theretofore: "Gone, [...] himself. [his previous self is] Departed, exposed, transfigured" (330).

Having witnessed the traumatic sight, wherein American heroic characters enact the antithesis of the conventional roles they have assumed in the frontier myth, Skip is no longer able to sustain his naïve faith in America's essential goodness and its missions in Southeast Asia. Skip's life, thereafter, follows a path that, in much the same way as Houston brothers, leads to the total destruction of his personality. Skip continues working for "Tree of Smoke" operation, until Francis meets his mysterious death in 1969, of which details remain unidentified until the end of the novel. Following this, escaping

several US Army officers who undertake the investigation of Francis's unauthorized missions in Vietnam, Skip disappears from the centre of the story, until, in 1983, Jimmy Storm, one of the colonel's former loyal henchmen, finds him executed in Kuala Lumpur for illegal trafficking of arms. In the judges' words, Skip, who has worked in Southeast Asia terrain under the pseudonym William French Benét, is described as "a major dealer in illegal arms; a scourge on our lives; a trafficker on our very blood"—undeniably a disgraceful end for the former CIA agent who embarked upon his journey across Asia with the ardent ambition to re-enact his cultural fathers' heroic adventures (551).

While earlier American novels and memoirs about the Vietnam War written by authors such as O'Brien, Kovic, Caputo and others also described the land of Vietnam as a sort of inverted landscape of American myth that thwarts all of the hero's expectations, they, to some extent, still preserve the myth of America's cultural fathers intact in their narratives. For instance, although the realistic part of the story of *Going After Cacciato* narrates Paul Berlin's experience in Vietnam in ways that contradict the conventional narrative patterns of combat romances derived from the frontier mythology, the protagonist's admiration for his cultural father is retained throughout the novel. As Hellman argues, Berlin's father—a veteran of WW II who fought against Nazi Germany to liberate France—"embodies at once the mythic concept of a good society

and good war.”<sup>235</sup> In addition, currently working as a skilled house-builder in their hometown Fort Dodge—a place name resonant with the history of America’s western expansion across the New World wilderness—his father “also represents the American as yeoman validating the American frontier impulse by extending civilization to the west.”<sup>236</sup> The protagonist frequently recalls the memory of his father and also romanticizes his father’s WW II experiences in order to compare them with his current situation in Vietnam. In contrast to the Vietnam War, in which Berlin and his fellow GIs “d[o] not know good from evil,” WW II and his father’s experiences therein are continuously looked back upon/imagined by the protagonist with a certain feeling of nostalgia and admiration as a past war in which Americans fought against the fascist Axis powers, possessing a noble cause and a clear sense of order and direction.<sup>237</sup> By consistently imagining WW II as the United States’ noble effort and figuratively associating it with American frontier mythology, O’Brien’s early novel in a way preserves the myth that Berlin’s father embodies as the nation’s legitimate history. As a consequence, the novel in effect closes the opportunities to re-examine the problems in mythologizing the history of America’s westward expansion and its past wars. In this respect, one can argue that *Going After Cacciato* is still open to the kinds of criticism that

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<sup>235</sup> Hellman 162.

<sup>236</sup> Hellman 162.

<sup>237</sup> Tim O’Brien, *Going After Cacciato* (New York: Broadway Books, 1999) 271.

the novel narrates America's involvement in the conflict in Vietnam and its morally ambiguous aspects merely as an exception or deviation from "the logic of American history."<sup>238</sup>

By contrast, Johnson's novel—in particular the ways in which the author narrates Francis's actions in Vietnam—invite the reader to more severely call into question the legitimacy of the myth of America's essential goodness and power. By making the young protagonist observe his cultural father Francis's faults in carrying out his counterinsurgency campaign, Johnson sharply question what early US Vietnam War fictions and memoirs have taken for granted. Inevitably evoking the memory of the catastrophe brought about by two American nuclear bombs dropped upon Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the final stage of WW II—the momentous historical event, the morally troubling aspects of which the United States has long refused to acknowledge—Francis's "Tree of Smoke" campaign casts a dark shadow upon the romanticized images of America's good past wars. Instead of rescuing people from the menace of the communists, Francis's actions, like America's military campaigns in Vietnam itself, only bring about the destruction of the bodies and spirits of individuals involved in his project. Furthermore, despite his desire to manipulate or "penetrate" the Vietnamese people's mind, Francis's covert psywar operations never succeed. For, as Skip notes earlier, the

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<sup>238</sup> Hellmann 161.

colonel's understating of Vietnam turns out to be utterly incomplete, biased by his own ideology and preconceptions. "You can't just paint everything with your mind to make it make look like it makes sense": A one-legged, seemingly deranged GI whom James Houston meets on his way to see wounded Harmon addresses the above remark (314). As the man is apparently out of his mind, his remark does not make any sense in the context of their immediate dialogue. However, when regarding this in relation to the entire plot of the novel, one can argue that it clearly serves as a significant comment that incisively criticizes the ethnocentric manner in which all the American characters, above all Francis, interpret the culture, history, and people of Vietnam.

### **Imaging the Pain of the Others from Inside: Toward New American Fictions about the Vietnam War and Beyond**

It is worth noting that, while witnessing the torturing/killing of a Vietcong captive committed by his compatriots and losing his deep faith in his mission, Skip seems to feel empathy for the tormented victim. The morning's experience forces Skip to question what he previously thought of as the absolute truth: the righteousness of America's errand in Southeast Asia, and the essential goodness of the "dirty, plain, honest" GIs. Whereupon, the narrator explains that the only truth that the protagonist could derive from the incident is that the Vietnamese captive was a living human being, whose life was precious to himself and his own beloved family in much the same ways as any



American soldiers' lives are dear to their families—the fact that is simple, but too often neglected in previous American accounts of the war: “In his mind that day's truest fact was that the bleeding, gauge-eyed man his uncle had dispatched so readily was a human soul in a family of others who had known him by name and held him in love, and he, Skip, a spy for history's greatest nation, was troubled this should trouble him” (303). As surmised above, after the Tet Offensive Skip is to follow the path of self-destruction without developing further the sentiment that he holds here. However, the above sentence in which the protagonist attempts sympathetically to imagine the enemy's plight is important in understanding Johnson's efforts to include the Vietnamese perspectives in his narrative—his attempts to describe the war-torn homeland seen by the Vietnamese characters.

In spite of his inclusion of several Vietnamese characters in the central plot of the novel, however, the author's portrayal of the Vietnamese people's experiences of the war is by no means flawless. Among the few reviewers who cast doubt upon Johnson's literary achievement in *Tree of Smoke*, B.R. Myers, in particular, severely criticizes the inconsistency of the author's prose style, and points out that this contributes to his failure to describing the Vietnamese characters' experiences realistically. As a case in point, Myers quotes the following scene, in which several Vietnamese villagers congregate for

the funeral of Thu—the nephew of Ngyuen Hao, Francis’s private driver: “Eight of the villagers attended, seven old men and someone’s grandchild all sitting in candlelight around the temple’s centerpiece without a corpse to look at, only a small crowd of bric-a-brac, mostly wooden Buddhas painted gold” (23). Paying close attention to the word “bric-a-brac,” Myers suggests that the word is utterly incongruous to the scene, wherein all the characters present are the local Vietnamese villagers, and which, therefore, must be narrated from their perspective: “I had to backtrack in case I’d missed a white man peering from a window, because from the villagers’ perspective a less appropriate word than a bric-a-brac is hard to imagine. Nor does it fit the perspective of the narrator, who likes to contrast the Americans’ parochialism with the quiet wisdom of the East, or his version thereof.”<sup>239</sup> Bric-a-brac signifies “old curiosities of artistic character, knick-nacks, antiquarian odds-and-ends, such as old furniture, plate, china, fans, statuettes, and the like,”<sup>240</sup> and thus, as being a word of French origin apparently apt to describe the alienness or exoticness of unfamiliar items, it certainly does not fit the viewpoint of the villagers who are looking at the objects of their religious worship. While Myer’s overall contention that Johnson’s Vietnam War novel is a poorly written fiction

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<sup>239</sup> B.R. Myers, “A Bright Shining Lie,” rev. of *Tree of Smoke*, by Dennis Johnson, *The Atlantic* 1 December 2007, 7 November 2013

<<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2007/12/a-bright-shining-lie/306434/>>.

<sup>240</sup> “bric-à-brac, n.,” *OED Online*, September 2013, Oxford University Press, 12 November 2013

<<http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/view/Entry/23165?redirectedFrom=bric-a-brac>>.

grossly overrated by US literary circles needs further reconsideration, his comment about the author's stylistic flaw indeed indicates the existence of a certain ethnocentric manner that permeates not only Johnson's depiction of the Vietnamese villagers, but also American writings about Vietnam in general—the tendency to portray the people of Vietnam within America's own cultural framework. I would argue, however, that when his insight is at its best, Johnson succeeds in creating an empathetic portrayal of the predicament of the Vietnamese people, kinds of which rarely appear in American accounts of the war.

The depiction of the war-torn homeland seen through the viewpoint of Nguyen Minh—Thu's brother, who serves as Francis's pilot—is one of such instances that demonstrate Johnson's ability to contemplate with compassion the hardships that the Vietnamese citizens must have undergone during the nation's prolonged war with Americans. One day, asked by Hao, Minh visits the village of his early childhood to see Uncle Huy, a brother of Hao's wife, who, with his wife and two little daughters, has been occupying a house legally owned by Hao, and to ask him to leave thereof. Unable to reject his uncle's troublesome errand, Minh, though reluctantly, returns to the house where he himself lived until his early youth. Whereupon, Johnson narrates the scene in which Minh sees the place of his childhood for the first time in several years as follows:

The same thick smoke from the trash piles, the same thatched houses, and then

his uncle's home with its orange clay shingles tarnished with mildew, the low gate open, the meter of cinderblock topped by green ironwork, pointed fleurs-de-lis topping the rusty bars—rustier now—the waist-high chain-link dividing this household from the neighbors' on either side, [...] and the same pillared front porch of shiny tile a shade of gray-violet he still found very soothing. [...] His aunt led him into the parlor and left him. The same shrine in its blue box atop the same black lacquerware chiffonier, taller than he by a couple of feet. Besides it the same huge candelabra, bowls of fruit, long sticks of incense in a large brass burner shaped like a lion, an array of small votive candles, and a small Bong Mai tree growing in a vase, perhaps the same Bong Mai from his childhood, he couldn't be sure. (441)

It should be noted that in this scene—by contrast to the scene examined earlier, wherein the villagers' day-to-day objects are erroneously seen through a stranger's/westerners' eyes—all the items are depicted as being familiar to Minh, related to his childhood memories. The items listed here include objects that can rarely be found in the lives of average middleclass Americans in the '60s—the thatched houses, the small shrine displayed within one's household, Bong Mei tree and so forth. In this scene, however, Johnson depicts those objects not as Oriental oddities and curiosities that evoke in the reader's mind the feelings of exoticism. Instead, by seeing them from the viewpoint of Minh, the author portrays the items of his uncle's abode as familiar objects that he knows very well, and that any Vietnamese use/look at everyday. In particular, the repetition of the adjective, "same," that qualifies most of the items indicates their ordinariness, or even mundaneness, when seen from the perspectives of the Vietnamese people. More importantly, however, it also speaks of the past time that Minh and his family members

spent in the house. These seemingly oriental objects are not only the same old things that Minh, as a Vietnamese, sees elsewhere on a day-to-day basis. Everything in the household—like the Bong Mai tree that reminds Minh of his childhood days, “the same bedding” that smells of “the musty tang of old perspiration,” and “the same galvanize” that brings back the memory of the time when “he and Thu [his brother] [...] had come to live” in the house “when their mother died”—retains within itself the signs of Minh’s family history, and thus evokes to him the strong sense of intimacy (442).

Significantly, by emphasizing the “sameness” of uncle Huy’s household items, what Johnson actually attempts to bring to the foreground of the story is Minh’s feeling of deep sorrow for the things that have been changed since his childhood. Although the objects of his childhood are kept in the same way as before, all of them, like the iron fence that has got “rustier,” indelibly inscribe on themselves more than ten years of time elapsed since Minh left the house to enlist in the RVN air force, and thus inevitably reminds him of the things that have changed in those past years. Thu, who had lived in the house with Minh, died five years ago by burning himself alive in protest against America’s support for the corrupt RVN government. The poverty and unfair social system brought about by the prolonged war have forced Huy’s family to occupy Hao’s house illegally, and stirred the discord between the two families. Huy has developed

further his antagonism toward Hao, since his sister's husband, taking the advantage of his new power that he has gained through his close connection with Americans, now attempts to coerce him and his family to leave the house. In this way, the familiar objects of Minh's childhood home, by compelling him to recognize the elapse of some ten years since his departure and the changes taking place therein, work to bring to light the tragedy that Minh and his families have experienced during the war.

By occasionally assuming the viewpoints of his Vietnamese characters and depicting the land of Vietnam and the war therein through their eyes, Johnson thus attempts a realistic portrayal of the hardships that the Vietnamese people underwent in the war. Although his efforts might still be imperfect, when examined together with Skip's observation quoted earlier, it is evident that what the author aims to accomplish through his narration of the Vietnamese perspectives such as examined above is to portray each of his Vietnamese characters as a living "human soul"—a person who is not merely a backdrop to American heroes' adventure, but who is instead an independent soul that has his or her own history. Their suffering in the war, therefore, must be narrated with a great degree of compassion equal to that with which previous American authors have depicted Americans' plight. Witnessing the historical process through which the frontier myth and its close relationship to American imaginative geography

about Vietnam have changed through time, I would contend that Johnson's sympathetic depiction of his Vietnamese characters' experience written more than three decades after the Fall of Saigon—as a rare instance in US literature about Vietnam that achieves to narrate a Vietnamese side of story resistant to America's ethnocentric narrative framework—suggests a possible direction that the following American writers about the Vietnam War and more recent foreign wars such as Afghanistan and Iraq have to follow.

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