

Swashbuckling in Vietnam: Reading American Mythical Landscapes in Robin Moore's *The Green Berets*

Hiroaki NAITO

Abstract

Drawing upon previous studies on American Vietnam War literature and the myth of the frontier, America's dominant national creation myth that romanticises European settlers' violent confrontation with native Americans in the New World wilderness, this essay examines Robin Moore's novel *The Green Berets* (1965), one of the earliest American fictions to write about the war. It contends that Moore tries to define the land and the people of Vietnam in terms heavily loaded with the conventional images of the frontier mythology, and that those images helped to form the society's earliest view on the war.

This essay reads Moore's Vietnam combat novel with a special focus upon "Home to Nannette," a chapter that recounts a Special Forces man's secret mission to fight with Communist guerrilla forces in Laotian mountains. Narrating the protagonist's lonesome, perilous journey into the heart of Indochinese wilderness, its plot bears striking similarities to that of what Amy Kaplan calls "swashbuckling romances," popular historical novels widely read in the late-nineteenth-century America. Both Moore's Vietnam novel and nineteenth-century historical romances have a white American male endowed with traditional virtues of frontiersmen as their protagonist and dramatizes his violent adventure and romance with an exotic, native woman in foreign landscapes. This essay attempts an in-depth investigation into the narrative similarities between the two to understand further the colonial ideology that underlies Moore's Vietnam War novel and its close ties with the myth of the frontier.

Keywords

twentieth-century American Literature, the Vietnam War,
Post-Colonialism, the frontier myth

I. Introduction: 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 American 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 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.¹⁾

The above passage taken from his bestselling novel, *The Green Berets* (1965), is especially worth noting, since it reveals a distinctively 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 should also be

pointed out that in the brief introductory section named “Badge of Courage,” Moore ensures the authenticity of 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 less than an unbiased portrayal 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, United States Army Special Forces personnel are identified with heroic Anglo-Saxon warriors, and the NLF [National Liberation Front (of South Vietnam)] guerrillas and NVA [North Vietnamese Army] 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 is narrated in terms profoundly loaded with the mythic images that glorify Euro-American males' prowess in Indian War.²⁾ 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 question."³⁾ 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 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 views 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.”⁴⁾ 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, corrupt, deceptive, and barbaric—and contends that Moore’s novel reflects America’s colonial mind-set, its long-held racism and hostility toward Asia.⁵⁾ In this way, according to Christopher, the stereotypical Asian characters appearing in *The Green Berets* “represent the most influential early view of the war.”⁶⁾

Referring to previous studies of the close relationship between the frontier myth and American Vietnam War literature, this essay also argues that the images of the mythic frontier in America Vietnam War accounts in many ways reflect American society’s dominant view of the war, land, and people of Vietnam. Based on this proposition, I will look at Moore’s *The Green Berets*, one of the earliest American fictions about the Vietnam War, and attempt a further examination of the mythic images appearing in the novel. In so doing, I will bring into focus the narrative similarities between Moore’s Vietnam combat novel and what Amy Kaplan calls “swashbuckling romances,” popular historical novels widely read in the late nineteenth century, which narrate American male protagonists’ violent adventures across foreign landscapes. According to Kaplan, being the greatest bestsellers at the time when America’s imperial ambition to expand its influence over overseas territories was at the centre of the nation’s debate to determine its course in the following decades, those stories are in fact a great popular medium through which sentiments to support America’s foreign expansion were expressed effectively. A detailed examination of the ideological linkage between Moore’s Vietnam novel and the historical

romances in the nineteenth century, therefore, will give us a better understanding about the ways in which the colonial desires underlying the hegemonic Euro-American culture were transferred to America's earliest Vietnam War representations.

II. "Home to Nannette," A Loner Frontiersman Fighting in Vietnam

In examining Moore's representation of Vietnam as an extension of the western frontier, an episode called "Home to Nannette," the longest but one narrative of all the Green Berets' tales in the novel, merits a special focus. The protagonist of the episode is Major Bernie Arklin, and the story narrates his secret mission in Laotian mountains. Arklin goes to a certain Laotian mountainous region on his own to wage guerrilla warfare against Pathet Lao, Laotian communist force closely associated with the North Vietnamese and the NLF forces. In fighting 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 America's violence upon Asian people by associating the images of the Indian War warrior with his hero. As will be elaborated shortly, 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. It is worth noting that 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 the frontier heroes repeatedly appearing in American popular culture. Richard Slotkin suggests that, in numerous cultural reproductions of the frontier myth, courageous White American heroes are frequently depicted as adept at using Native Americans' unconventional ways of fighting, which they have acquired through the direct contact or conflict with Indian tribes in the New World wilderness, and this is what distinguishes them from their European counterparts. At the same time, however, they are regarded as distinctly superior to Native Americans because of their European blood.⁷⁾ In the same manner, Moore emphasises Arklin's great flexibility in adjusting to the unorthodox, anti-modern styles of battle to indicate the protagonist's genealogical association with the frontier Indian War fighter.

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 while 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."⁸⁾ 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 American society, Moore's tales of the Greens Berets' savage battles are not as subversive of the community's moral codes as they seem at first glance. 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 and endorsing the hero's "going native" fantasy. A close analysis of "Home to Nannette" centering around the tension between the two impulses thus inevitably leads us to examine the traditional values of American 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," it also reflects conventional US ideas about race, gender, sexuality, and masculinity in the early Vietnam War period.⁹⁾

The narrative of "Home to Nannette" seems to be peculiar among 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 first time in Saigon, the seasoned soldier of the most secretive military unit initially regarded him with “predictable suspicion” (167). However, upon learning that Moore, being a civilian journalist, had risked his life along with the Green Berets in the Vietnamese terrain, Arklin relented and started to talk to the narrator in a friendly manner. 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 American 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 Indochinese 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 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 similarity to that of the popular historical novels published in the late nineteenth century that Amy Kaplan analyses. Kaplan argues that, although the significance of historical novels at the turn of the century has often been overlooked by 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,” and served as a great vehicle for the discourse that abetted US imperialism in the Third World.¹⁰ 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 at the turn of the century. By comparing Moore’s story with the general plot of American 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 novels helped to create in the late nineteenth century. In short, 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.

III. Swashbuckling in Vietnam

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.¹¹⁾

The basic plot of “Home to Nannette” surprisingly resembles that of historical romances of the late nineteenth century. In the outset, the narrator states that Arklin’s mission in 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 United States (162). Nevertheless, the Central Intelligence Agency, which conducts the Special Forces’ actions, detects signs of Communist Pathet Lao 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 with whom he collaborates. The narrator explains that in order to cooperate with the Meo tribesmen—the native inhabitants of the Laotian mountainous areas—Arklin, without the slightest 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). Moreover, Arklin talks 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). As discussed earlier, Arklin’s manner to adapt skilfully to the native tribesmen’s ways of life reminds one of the mythic frontier heroes’ unique skills to learn from Native Americans’ unconventional combat stratagems.

In addition to the apparent similarities in the heroes’ characteristics, there is another important element that exists both in *The Green Berets* and in the swashbuckling romances of the late nineteenth century: that 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, expressed vicariously 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"—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 (187).

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-year-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 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 discontent over 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 white American culture. Despite the protagonist’s seeming concerns about his American family, it is virtually a tale of a white man who escapes his mid-life crisis at home and regenerates through sensual affair 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 to unleash secret desires lurking beneath the disguise of a good American father. In the Laotian wilderness, Arklin is

able to forget his own aging, by becoming a lover of fifteen-year-old girl, who is scarcely older than 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 Meos as a people essentially lewd and primitive. As Christopher argues, the author’s portrayal of the indigenous Asian people is decidedly “oversexed.”¹²⁾ Indeed, Moore conceives the tribesmen to be savages who are excessively obsessed with sex, and who happily embrace the heathenish practice of polygamy. In so doing, Moore attempts to differentiate his American protagonist from the barbaric Asians: the author portrays Arklin as a stoic—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.”¹³⁾ As I have already examined earlier, before the protagonist consummates the marriage, Moore deliberately informs the reader that Arklin does this out of absolute necessity. If the protagonist refused 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 his higher ethical standard.

Importantly, the protagonist's "marriage" to 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 the United States' military intervention in Indochina. According to Kaplan, in the popular historical romances of the late nineteenth century, the heroines who fall in love with American heroes in effect serve as "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."¹⁴

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 direct" yet "more complete" political as well as economical control over the Third World.¹⁵ 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 as well as its anti-European, anti-colonialist national identity. 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 “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 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 advanced technologies of modern warfare that they apparently lack, but also by his masculine powers that even the furious savage warriors 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 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."¹⁶⁾ At the same time, however, Moore carefully preserves the racial hierarchy that he creates between the white American hero and the indigenous Asian people. With regard to this, it is particularly worth noting that Nannette, the heroine of the episode, 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). The heroine's physical traits that the author deliberately describes—her "lighter colored" skin, "smaller breast," and "delicately boned" body—indicate a trace of European blood. Those physical characteristics and her linguistic ability in French distinguish the heroine from the average Meos. In other words, Ha Bin alias Nannette is too noble a woman to marry an ordinary 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 the Beret’s civic actions to improve the lives of the uncivilized people. On the other, however, 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 bravely battling against the evil Communists, and, on the other hand, by making him perceive the Vietnamese and Laotians to be essentially inferior, Moore in effect deprives the latter two peoples of their nativeness, or indigeneity, their legitimate right to take charge of their own homeland. In contrast to the “hardy” Meo tribesmen whose primitive physical strength and fighting morale the narrator praises as living up to those of the masculine American hero, Vietnamese people, whether they are Americans’ ally or not, are often portrayed as coward, corrupt, and at times excessively brutal (168). Moore is hardly sympathetic toward Laotians either. The narrator explains that the novel’s American heroes do not work with the Laotian regular army, since they are cowards unqualified to fight kinds of war that the courageous

Special Forces men 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). The Meo tribesmen, on the other hand, are depicted as ferocious 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 warriors demonstrate their intrepid fighting 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 these descriptions, one can once again find an interesting parallel between Moore’s Indochina and the remote, exotic kingdoms depicted in American historical romances of the late nineteenth century. Kaplan argues that the distant lands which the swashbuckling heroes move across 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.”¹⁷⁾ This is, for instance, true of Graustark, “one of those many infernal little kingdoms,” where the native men “fought like Sam Patch”¹⁸⁾ in George Barr McCutcheon’s novel *Graustark* (1901) and the republic of Olancho, the setting of Richard Harding Davis’s *Soldiers of Fortune* (1897), “one of those little republic down there,”¹⁹⁾ in South America, where the protagonist dies defending his Spanish lady against the local nationalists’ uprising. On one hand, those 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. With Nannette being a French descendant, the Meo village can be interpreted 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 male warriors. Arklin's action to protect the former French colony from the revolutionaries to some extent vindicates 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 distinguish his American protagonist from corrupt French colonialists, by making him demonstrate abilities that Europeans do not possess, which are his great flexibility in adapting to the lifestyles of Meo tribesmen as well as his democratic, anti-colonial ethics to treat the indigenous Asians as his equals—"his established policy of being one with the Meo" (208).

At the same time, the American hero carries out civilizing missions to educate the ignorant Meo people, liberating them from old customs that have continued to harm their wellbeing. One example of such actions is Arklin's effort to "reestablish certain sanitary practices, such as the use of

latrine” that has completely been abandoned since French left the land (179). Upon arriving the village, the protagonist is utterly disappointed by the ways in which the buildings and sanitary infrastructures that Europeans installed 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 [the Meo people who had converted to Christianity] returned to their tribes, it was common knowledge that they had reverted all too quickly to loincloths [...]”—Arklin embarks upon civilizing missions to emancipate the indigenous from harmful old practices and poor infrastructure, a tough task that Americans’ predecessor, the French, have never succeeded (179). Although Arklin leaves the Meo village after establishing America’s counterinsurgency post there, in essence Moore’s narrative 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.

IV. Conclusion

In this way, Moore’s Vietnam/Indochina is a landscape romanticized in manners that are 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 as well as the heroic western gunmen and World War II 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, which is an apparent geographical incongruity.²⁰⁾ Planned by Wayne himself, who had intended to produce a film that would pay tribute to Special Forces men in Vietnam, the film adaptation of Moore's Vietnam combat novel achieved a commercial success. However, it was severely 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."²¹⁾ Although the film version at times dramatizes Special Forces men's relationship with the Vietnamese people in rather sentimental ways, its wish to interpret Vietnam in terms of America's own national mythology certainly echoes that of Moore's original novel.

Notes

- 1) Robin Moore, *The Green Berets* (New York: Avon Books, 1965) p. 25.
- 2) John Hellman, *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: Columbia UP, 1986) pp. 41-69. See also Renny Christopher, *The Viet Nam War / The American War: Images and Representations in Euro-American and Vietnamese Exile Narratives* (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1995) pp. 201-09.
- 3) Milton J. Bates, *The Wars We Took to Vietnam: Cultural Conflict and Story Telling* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1996) p. 2.
- 4) Renny Christopher, *op.cit.*, p. 203.
- 5) *Ibid.*, p. 207.
- 6) *Ibid.*, p. 209.
- 7) Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*, (Norman, Oklahoma: U of Oklahoma P, 1998) pp. 453-61.
- 8) John Hellmann, *op.cit.*, p. 57.
- 9) Renny Christopher, *op.cit.*, p. 209.
- 10) 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): p. 660.

- 11) *Ibid.*, p. 666.
- 12) Renny Christopher, *op.cit.*, p. 208.
- 13) John Hellmann, *op.cit.*, p. 64.
- 14) Amy Kaplan, *op.cit.*, p. 676.
- 15) *Ibid.*, p. 670.
- 16) John Hellmann, *op.cit.*, p. 64.
- 17) Amy Kaplan, *op.cit.*, p. 670.
- 18) *Ibid.*, p. 669.
- 19) *Ibid.*, p. 670.
- 20) *The Green Berets*, dir. John Wayne, and Ray Kellog, Warner Brothers Pictures. 2005. DVD.
- 21) Roger Ebert, "The Green Berets (26 June 1968)," *Roger Ebert.com*, 13 March 2019 <<http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-green-berets-1968>>.