

Murdering the Myth of America's Cultural Fathers: Reading Denis Johnson's *Tree of Smoke* as an Updated Critique of America's Frontier Mythology

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Summary

In this paper, I will read Denis Johnson's *Tree of Smoke* (2007), asserting that, throughout 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.

Keywords

Contemporary American Literature, the Vietnam War, Post-9/11 Novels,
Post-Colonialism, the Frontier Myth

I. The Vietnam War and America's Loss of Innocence

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 throe of death ominously resembles that of a 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. (Johnson 4-5)

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 (Jones). 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 closely associated with 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. Kennedy succeeded in gaining the then public's support 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”—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” (Slotkin 489). Further extending his mythical rhetoric, Kennedy and his coterie associated the contemporary world geopolitics with US popular narratives of the Indian War, and presented Third World countries where Communists steadily increased their influence as the Cold War frontier. As a “hero-president,” 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 (Slotkin 497). Since the 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 public's disillusionment with America's most cogent myth in the coming decade, 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 the beginning of Houston's 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 (Slotkin

51–62; Kaplan 659–61). 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 States" (qtd. in Slokin 52). In Roosevelt's and others' political propaganda heavily loaded with the terms of America's national creation 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 fathers'.

Bill Houston moves about the Philippine jungle, hoping to prove his virility through a 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, and unable to afford the expense of a higher education, his own future in the hometown seems to be utterly 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 for signing up for the Marines would not be as dutiful and patriotic as those of the new, devout Americans whom Kennedy romanticized. Rather, he goes abroad in order to escape the hardship and destitution that has continued to inflict 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 60s, 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) Euro-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 ignorance about Asia and its peoples, his disregard for each people’s unique 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 the other peoples’ agency and sees their history and lands as a mere backdrop of 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, Houston's 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 perpetrated by American soldiers serving in the Vietnam War, in which many young American youths including James, Bill Houston's younger brother, are to participate. At the end of this brief episode, 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 will never be spared the memories of the Vietnam War.

The scenes of appalling killing and destruction caused by American military operations in Vietnam—including My Lai Massacre, US soldiers' mass murder of between 347 and 504 unarmed Vietnamese civilians in the

hamlets of My Lai and My Khe that took place in March 1968—have been recorded and narrated through various media, and have left deep, persistent scars in America’s national history. In other words, the experiences of the war have 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.

II. Writing About Vietnam in Post-9/11 America

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 Michael Herr, Robert Stone, Tim O’Brien and others, whose narratives, in their own unique ways, challenge the concepts of America’s exceptional goodness and might stemming from the frontier mythology (Hellmann 139–169). However, it indeed is an endeavor 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

contention wherein people try to reinterpret, rewrite, or revise the history in ways favorable to their own politico-historical perspectives. In particular, during the early 2000s, when Johnson composed his massive Vietnam novel, what Robert McMahon calls “a conservative revisionism,” which seeks to disregard the negative consequences of America’s military intervention in Vietnam and reinterpret it as its consistently righteous mission to protect Asia from the communists’ terror, gained considerable attention in the arena of America’s political mainstream (McMahon, “Vietnam War” 767–68).¹⁾

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 conducts are without substance”—would aptly represent an aspect of US public’s attitude toward the legacy of the Vietnam War in the early 2000s (Lewy vii). 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 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 reelection in the 2004 Presidential Election in their attempts to impugn Kerry’s involvement in “the war crimes disinformation campaign” (“John Kerry’s Phony War Crime Charges”). 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 dispute. 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" (Priest 539), the president and his advocates adopted the revisionist discourse and "attempted to reappropriate Vietnam's lesson for his rhetorical and ultimately practical purposes" in an effort to endorse their own foreign interventionism (Priest 542).

I would argue that Johnson constructed his version of the Vietnam War to challenge this part of the nation's willful amnesia, as it were, to dismiss the unsettling memories of the war. 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 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 later, in questioning

Americans' 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 Southeastern country, wherein US soldiers strive to fulfill their mission, America's heroic, triumphal adventures promised in its myth are completely subverted.

III. Murdering the Myth of America's Cultural Fathers

Johnson's *Tree of Smoke* narrates the Vietnam War and its consequences on 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. When focusing upon the fates of its central American characters, however, one can argue that the novel in essence figuratively reiterates the two incidents taking place at 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 extant difference 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.

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 arguably 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 that of Bill Houston, Skip's journey across Southeast Asian landscapes also follows the identical pattern of narrative 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 this respect, Johnson's Vietnam War story—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” (Hellmann 161). Indeed, Houston leaves the society of their immediate parent—Phoenix, Arizona, with its tedium and the closed opportunities—to enter Asian frontier landscape, where his “cultural fathers,” American Cold War warriors whose images are romanticized by JFK and his coterie, courageously fight against the evil Communists. After setting his foot in Vietnam, however, the hero of the earlier US Vietnam War accounts, as John Hellmann argues, “suffers the traumatic shock of finding that he has instead entered a crazy landscape of American myth frustrating all of his expectations” (161). Likewise, Bill's failed hunting experience works to represent US military's excessive violence against the Vietnamese citizens that subverts the society's shared myth of America's good wars.

In Skip's case, his desire to reenact US cultural fathers' heroic adventures is more obvious than Houston's. Born in a family several of whose paternal

male relatives are military servicemen 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 throughout the world.

Among all his 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 exists in the world of America's national myth of its past just wars. Francis is also a veteran of WW II, an ex-pilot of the legendary Flying Tigers, who accomplished the remarkable feat of escaping from the notorious Japanese prison camp in Burma. After the military success 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. 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 the 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" (Johnson 49), is a model of Colonel Edwin Hillandale, alias the Ragtime Kid—one of the heroic Americans in Eugene Burdick's and William Lederer's *The Ugly American* (Drinnon 377–80).

Published in 1958, Lederer-Burdick's anti-communist political novel was one of the earliest US novels to write about America's interventionism in Vietnam. The book gained nationwide attention when Senators John F. Kennedy and others sent to every members of the US Senate a copy, and

eventually sold over four million copies. Further still, it allegedly influenced President Eisenhower's decision to reconsider/intensify his entire Vietnam aid program. That a book dealing with the issues of a remote Asian country that had theretofore held a marginal place in the United States' global interests attained such extensive publicity seems rather surprising. However, Drinnon and John Hellmann argue that the authors constructed their narrative within the framework of the frontier myth, and so struck a cord with many Americans (Drinnon 374–79; Hellmann 3–38). Set in Sarkhan, a fictitious Southeast Asian country resembling Vietnam, the novel narrates the actions of several American heroes who strive to battle evil communists and bring to Sarkhan/Vietnam the benefit of democracy and free-market capitalism, and presented them as contemporary pioneers toiling in Asian frontier. As Drinnon maintains, the authors depict *The Ragtime Kid* as “a sort of twenty-century reincarnation of Johnny Appleseed, warning folks against modern merciless savages and handing out the seeds and saplings of American democracy” (378). Carrying his harmonica with which he cheerfully plays jazz and native tunes, and with his great love for the culture, 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. Unlike many “ugly” Americans—second-rate civil servants and military officers serving in Asia who despise anything that comes across as Asian—Hillandale is willing to accommodate himself to the local villagers' ways of life, because, according to him, a deep understanding of Philippine culture gives him “a key which will open their [Filipinos'] hearts” (Lederer and Burdick 181).

As evident in the Colonel's frequent remarks about the outstanding personality and tactics of his former commander, Johnson deliberately portrays Francis as an experienced CIA agent, who inherits Lansdale's unorthodox counterinsurgency strategies, epitomized by what Francis describes as "trust[ing] the locals, learn[ing] their songs and stories, fight[ing] for their hearts and minds" (449). 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," he not only describes Francis's sturdy physique—his "barrel chested and potbellied [...] sunburned" body—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).

Nonetheless, although Burdick and Lederer portray Hillandale as a "happy-go-lucky character" who sympathizes deeply with the indigenous people, Lansdale's character and his strategies, in reality, were profoundly different from his fictional persona and its actions (Drinnon 378).²⁾ Firstly, Lansdale's understanding of the culture and history of the local people was incomplete and even skewed. Lansdale identified the Huks with the Communists and regarded 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. 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. Secondly, in ways quite contrary to Hillandale’s cheerful character and his great respect for the Filipino people, his real-life model adopted campaigns that in every way “violated all the written and unwritten laws of land warfare,” including torturing and killing of innocent peasants (Drinnon 394).

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

“This isn’t a Cold War, Skip. It’s World War Three.” [...] 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 interprets 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.³⁾

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. As a momentous event taking place in the time of America’s westward expansion, the battle has frequently been retold in various cultural representations since the 1930s, wherein the Anglo-American soldiers’ fierce fighting against the massive Mexican troops are often admired as the nation’s mythic fathers’ selfless efforts to defend freedom and democracy that contemporary Americans have to emulate (Slotkin 504–05, 515–16). By identifying the legendary battle in the west with America’s ongoing campaigns to “contain” the Communists’ influence, Francis endorses his covert 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, describes 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 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 reenact Lansdale’s notorious psychological warfare in the Philippines, with which he endeavors to “penetrate their [the Vietnamese people’s] national soul” (194).⁴⁾ Nevertheless, Johnson portrays Francis 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. Hereby, the author tries to delineate what he deems to be the more accurate version of the truths of America’s interventionism in Vietnam.

Among all of Francis’s misconducts that Skip observes, the most

traumatic incident and one that forces the protagonist to call into question the worldview with which he has understood America's identity and its role is torturing/murdering of a Vietcong soldier that happens in the morning following the Tet Offensive—North Vietnamese and NLF forces' joint campaign to launch massive surprise attacks upon important US commands on 30th January 1968, the first day of Vietnamese new year celebration. The US base near the village of Cao Phuc, where Francis serves, is also attacked by the enemy, and in the morning following the assault, Skip goes to the base, and thereupon witnesses an 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 during the battle. Presently, the black soldier begins to torture the captive, while another terribly angered GI called "Cowboy" (i.e. James Houston, Bill Houston's younger brother) yells and urges him to torment the prisoner. Meanwhile, no one, including Francis, dares to intervene to stop the GIs' atrocious act:

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 [...]. [...] /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 Houston—and a savage “Indian”—the cowboy's iniquitous foe impersonated by a black soldier—congregate to join in an evil, pagan ritual of torturing 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 an event that

marks 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.

IV. Conclusion

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* (1978) 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 Hellmann 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" (162). 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” (162). 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 (O’Brien 271). 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 reexamine the problems in mythologizing the history of America’s westward expansion and its past wars. In this respect, *Going After Cacciato* is still open to the kinds of criticism that 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” (Hellmann 161).

By contrast, Johnson’s novel—in particular the ways in which the author narrates Francis’s actions in Vietnam—invites 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 many of America’s military campaigns in Vietnam, only bring about the destruction of the bodies and spirits of individuals involved in his project. Despite his desire to “penetrate” the Vietnamese people’s mind, Francis’s covert psywar operations never succeed. For, as examined earlier, the colonel’s understating of Vietnam turns out to be utterly incomplete, biased by his own 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 his wounded comrade addresses the above remark (Johnson 314). The man has apparently lost his sanity, and his remark comes across as utterly incongruent in the context of their immediate dialogue. However, when reading this in relation to the entire plot of the novel, it clearly serves as a significant comment that incisively criticizes the ethnocentric manners in which all the American characters, above all Francis, interpret the culture, history, and people of Vietnam—I would argue that this aptly epitomizes Johnson’s critique of the frontier myth and the concept of America’s exceptional goodness derived thereof. In this way, by powerfully reminding one of the unsettling memories of America’s misconducts in Vietnam, and also by subverting what has conventionally been regarded as America’s master narrative, Johnson’s novel challenges a part of the nation’s attitude towards the legacy of the Vietnam War since the early 2000s, namely the resurgence of the revisionist

discourse to dismiss its lessons.

Notes

- 1) For detailed accounts of US revisionist discourse of the Vietnam War, see Priest 538–53; Catton 7–11; and McMahon “Contested Memory” 159–184.
- 2) 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*.
- 3) For the full transcript of President Bush’s address on the United States’ war on terror, see Bush. It is also worth noting that President Bush himself likened his war on terror campaigns to WW III in an interview. See “Bush Likens War on Terror to WW III.”
- 4) 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.

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