

# Confronting the Otherness of Frontier Asia: Changing Perceptions of Wilderness Warfare in US War Narratives<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

Empires are by their very nature a centrifugal affair; to become imperial is to somehow discredit borders, intuitively move forward, and so extend into a pre-eminence that transcends the here-and-now pragmatics of the nation state. The identities that empires fashion for themselves are not only circumscribed by the often immutable traditions in their centres, but also by the flux of the frontiers upon which their uncertain future is staked. The self-conscious empires of the modern age have always entertained the knowledge that after the rise must come the fall, and this uneasy prescience of inevitability has significantly shaped their

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cultural responses to perceived transgressions on their imperial frontiers. This article explores the cultural transposition of frontier conflict from the arena of globalised Realpolitik to the aesthetic realm of war narratives in the informal empire of the United States of America both during and after the Vietnam War. The article contends that the characterisation of the frontier in US Vietnam War narratives is heavily dependent upon prevailing attitudes towards perceived degrees of imperial strength or vulnerability that permeate the socio-political domain.

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Different places on the face of the earth have different vital effluence, different vibration, different chemical exaltation, different polarity with different stars: call it what you like. But the spirit of the place is a great reality.<sup>2</sup>

Empires are by their very nature a centrifugal affair; to become imperial is to somehow discredit borders, intuitively move forward, and so extend into a pre-eminence that transcends the here-and-now pragmatics of the nation state. To become imperial is also to sacrifice a moiety of national interest for national interest's sake, to pattern an inherently economic pursuit of territory into concentrated and politicised myth; a question of

destiny and prestige. The identities that empires fashion for themselves from this 'emanation imperative' are not only circumscribed by the often immutable traditions in their centres, but also by the flux of the frontiers upon which their uncertain future is staked. The self-conscious empires of the modern age have always entertained the knowledge that after the rise must come the fall, and this uneasy prescience of inevitability has significantly shaped their cultural responses to perceived transgressions – civil disobedience, rebellion, war – against the understood and relied-upon homogeneity of their wholes. Unsurprisingly, through the ages, the imperial body politic has usually come under attack at the extremities of its limbs: backwater insurgencies that prompted the deployment of troops in remote and alien climes, fighting inscrutable enemies to preserve the precious – and preciously thin – red line across jungles, mountain passes, and veldt for a greater, if perhaps equally inscrutable, glory.

This article seeks to explore the cultural transposition of frontier conflict from the arena of globalised Realpolitik to the aesthetic realm of war narratives in the informal (although some would say formal) empire of the United States of America. More specifically, the article focuses on the foremost challenge to US imperial pre-eminence, the frontier conflict of the Vietnam War, and examines the cultural response to this challenge by

analysing how the distant frontier is portrayed, both during and after the Vietnam War, and how perceptions alter according to the relative ascendancy of empire. This article will consider war narratives in the broadest sense, incorporating traditional forms such as the novel (*Dispatches*) and the short-story (*The Things They Carried*), as well as considering more populist formats such as movies (*Top Gun* and *Rambo First Blood – Part II*). The article concludes by proposing that frontier war narratives are heavily context dependent upon the relative degree of imperial strength and confidence.

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From the very beginnings of the modern American nation in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, its people have been captivated by the wilderness. Apprehensive of what lay beyond the western frontier of their cosseted colonies, the early Puritan settlers believed it was Gods will, and their 'manifest destiny' to conquer and civilise the savage great beyond. It is from these early experiences with the rugged wilderness and its native inhabitants which gave rise to a distinct genre of literature, termed 'Frontier literature'. Beginning with popular 'dime novels' and travel writings, such as Francis Parkman's *The Oregon Trail*,<sup>3</sup> early Frontier literature catered to an audience keen to hear how settlers and mountain men were taming the Wild West. The publication of novels such as James Fenimore Cooper's

*Leatherstocking Tales*<sup>4</sup> and John A. McClung's *Sketches of Western Adventure*<sup>5</sup> developed the myth of frontier men, such as Daniel Boone, that actively embraced the savage wilderness and prepared the way for American civilisation. The iconic myth of an ever-expanding American quest to civilise untamed wilderness also received academic support from Frederick Johnson Turner and his article 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History.'<sup>6</sup> Here, Turner argued the importance of expanding civilisation as a unique trait of Americans and one which conferred strength and independence on the nation. His writings would prove influential not only in cementing the 'manifest destiny' legend but also in providing a basis for American imperialism overseas. Indeed, despite a seeming reluctance to develop an empire, the US soon expanded its territories both formally, by occupying countries such as the Philippines from 1898, and informally, through an ever-increasing socio-economic hegemony. A fascination with the wilderness remained a strong theme in the American literary consciousness throughout the growth of its empire. However, it was when America began sending troops to the jungles of South-east Asia – where America would experience its first major challenge to its global predominance, both militarily and psychologically – that the emphasis on frontier wilderness would make a powerful re-emergence.

Intervention in Vietnam represented a new manifest destiny for the Americans. A new frontier. A new wilderness. The challenge for America was whether Vietnam could be tamed into a democratic garden, or whether the 'spirit of the place' would prove so overwhelming and alien as to remain a savage, communist wilderness. Michael Herr's *Dispatches*<sup>7</sup> and Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (TTC)<sup>8</sup> are considered two of the most engaging Vietnam War narratives. Significantly, both authors draw upon their personal experiences of the war, offering the reader a first-hand interpretation of the native environment. Descriptions of this new frontier contain strong echoes of the initial Puritan apprehension of what lay beyond the western frontier. According to Herr, 'Vietnam was a dark room, full of deadly objects.'<sup>9</sup> An environment that was 'spooky, unbearably spooky, spooky beyond belief.'<sup>10</sup> The peculiarity of the wilderness is in stark contrast to the reliability and order of nature in America. As Herr observed, 'nothing was in its season.'<sup>11</sup> This perceived irregularity of the Vietnamese wilderness was the very antithesis to America. The new frontier represented a distinct Otherness to the American homeland.

Nevertheless, this should have presented little concern to America. Indeed, it was merely a case of mastering their new surroundings, just as they had accomplished some 350 years ago with the taming of the American wilderness. In fact, this was what the Americans attempted to achieve: to familiarise the unfamiliar. The names of villages and landmarks were translated into English, the country was divided up into various 'war zones', and the alien environment was referred to in recognisable measurements. Herr noted this phenomenon and offers the reader the example of the hills, 'which the Americans usually named according to height in meters, Hill Three Hundred Whatever.'<sup>12</sup>

However, Tony Tanner has shown the necessity to discard the idea of imposing a taxonomic nomenclature on nature. Tanner contends that it is naïve to 'attempt to master (and appropriate) it with measuring machines, the misguided idea that the mysteries of the "ground" can be transplanted into the cartographic signs of the "map".'<sup>13</sup> Tanner's notion is verified in *Dispatches*, because despite such attempts to bring order to the inordinarily, the alienation and spookiness of the environment does not lift. Indeed, it only deepens:

[T]he war could cream you. It was the same with your ongoing attempts at getting used to the jungle or the blow-you-out climate or the saturating strangeness of the place which didn't lessen with exposure so often as it fattened and darkened in accumulating alienation.<sup>14</sup>

This sense of alienation with the Otherness of Vietnam rapidly morphed into a belief that the wilderness was alive. As Mitchell Sanders explains in *TTC*:

All these different voices. Not human voices, though. Because it's the mountains. Follow me? The rock – it's *talking*. And the fog, too, and the grass and the goddamn mongooses. Everything talks. The trees talk politics, the monkeys talk religion. The whole country. Vietnam. The place talks. It talks. Understand? Nam – it truly *talks*.<sup>15</sup>

Vietnam is depicted as a living organism, a corporeal entity that is capable of consciously impacting upon American soldiers. As Tina Chen asserts: 'The focus on the ways in which Vietnam articulates itself transcends the distinctions between the animate and the inanimate.'<sup>16</sup> The

Americans, who believe that the wilderness has allied itself to their Viet Cong foes, viewed this phenomenon with disdain. For instance, Herr offers a vivid description of how the Viet Cong would simply disappear whenever US forces pursued them into the jungle.<sup>17</sup>

This dissatisfaction with the terrain brought confusing consequences: who exactly was the American enemy? Were they fighting the Vietnamese communists or the Vietnamese landscape? Indeed, the destruction and devastation of the native countryside is a well-documented fact, with America using chemicals such as Agent Orange to decimate the landscape. This is touched upon in *Dispatches*, when Herr notes that in a single mission, US actions destroyed 'hundreds of acres of cultivated plantation and wild forest alike'. The officer justified this policy on the basis that it was 'denying the enemy valuable resources and cover.'<sup>18</sup> The hatred and disregard for the Vietnamese wilderness is exquisitely summed up by Herr, who after the obliteration of the surrounding hills of Khe Sanh, claims: '[W]hen we decimated them, broke them, burned parts of them so that nothing would ever live on them again, it must have given a lot of marines a good feeling, an intimation of power.'<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, the problem was that the wilderness could not only protect and support the murderous Viet Cong, but the very wilderness itself could kill you. This line of reasoning is based upon James Lovelock's 'Gaia hypothesis', which contends that the earth is a living organism, able to maintain and protect itself against destructive forces.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, it is to be expected that in the face of American brutality, nature would retaliate. Although somewhat bizarre and controversial,<sup>21</sup> there are interesting parallels between Lovelock's theory and Vietnamese War literature. As Herr chillingly proclaims: 'Forget the Cong, the *trees* would kill you.'<sup>22</sup> The description of Curt Lemon's death in *TTC*, offers a further example:

But if I could ever get the story right, how the sun seemed to gather around him and pick him up and lift him high into a tree. If I could somehow recreate the fatal whiteness of that light, the quick glare, the obvious cause and effect.<sup>23</sup>

Although O'Brien insists that it was a rigged 105 round and not sunlight that killed Lemon, the above description suggests otherwise, especially considering O'Brien's somewhat ambiguous relationship with truth. Indeed, there seems to be something of a natural union between Lemon's death and the sunlight that strongly suggests that nature played a part in

the death. As Pritchard notes: 'Invariably considered to be the giver and sustainer of life, the sun is examined from the point of view of the brutality and savagery that is also inherent in nature.'<sup>24</sup>

A further example from *TTC* comes in the death of Kiowa: 'There were bubbles where Kiowa's head should've been. He remembered grabbing the foot. He remembered pulling hard, but how the field seemed to pull back, like a tug-of-war he couldn't win.'<sup>25</sup> The personification of the field, which actively engages America in combat, suggests that it was nature that killed Kiowa. Thus, once more, it appears that nature is fighting back against America.

This notion of the untamed wilderness being a conscious danger to the American people stems back to perceptions found in the original Frontier literature. In these stories, not only may nature kill you, but it could also degrade you. As Richard Slotkin explains:

It was at times an embarrassment to Puritan writers and a source of guilt to Puritan soldiers that under the pressures of battle in the tangles and isolated wilderness, white troops often behaved like their Indian enemies – burning the villages of their enemies,

slaughtering not only the warriors but also the wounded, the women and the children.<sup>26</sup>

Indeed, if you substitute 'Vietnamese' for 'Indian', it could easily describe some of the American savagery alluded to in Vietnam War literature. Herr describes how American troops would take pictures of dead children and sever the heads of their enemy,<sup>27</sup> whilst O'Brien notes how one soldier made 'a necklace of human tongues.'<sup>28</sup> Such actions affirm the capability of the untamed wilderness to reduce the civilised American soldier to the perceived savagery of their enemy.

Thus, it appears that the cause of America's failings are not due to the competence of the Vietnamese enemy; rather, defeat stemmed from the inherent evil of the Vietnamese environment. As Herr writes: 'The Puritan belief that Satan dwelt in Nature could have been born here... It is ghost-story country.'<sup>29</sup> Vietnam is far from a civilised Garden of Eden. As Sanders wittily remarks in *TTC*: 'Well, that's Nam... Garden of Evil.'<sup>30</sup>

Military defeat in Vietnam was an event that deeply embarrassed America, leaving it feeling humiliated, and arguably emasculated too. Rosalind Pritchard stresses how 'the female and the natural world have been

inextricably linked in language in a dualist paradigm in which the male and modern progress have been positioned in a higher realm.<sup>31</sup> Both texts suggest that the masculine technology and military might of America was not sufficient to defeat the feminine Vietnamese wilderness. Indeed, the parallels between 'Mother Nature' and the feminine are striking, with the dark, warm and viscous jungle threatening to re-absorb the soldier just as the infant was contained within the womb. The feminine attributes of the wilderness are noted by O'Brien who writes: '[sometimes] you'd swear you were walking through some kind of soft black protoplasm, Vietnam, the blood and the flesh.'<sup>32</sup>

This metonymic relationship between female and nature, in which both represent danger and alienation, is demonstrated most succinctly in the story of 'Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong' in *TTC*. In this improbable vignette Mary Anne Bell, a soldier's girlfriend, is flown into her boyfriend's secluded medical camp. Mary Anne is described as having 'long white legs and blue eyes and a complexion like strawberry ice-cream'<sup>33</sup>, in essence a symbol of the comfort and ease associated with domesticity and home. However, Mary Anne's character rapidly alters as she becomes lured by the mysteries of the Vietnamese landscape and begins going on missions with the Green Berets into the wilderness. Her attraction to the

nature is unrelenting and uncontrollable as she announces: 'I want to eat this place. Vietnam. I want to swallow the whole country – the dirt, the death – I just want to eat it and have it there inside me.'<sup>34</sup> This desire to incorporate Vietnam through ingestion signifies the metonymic relationship between female and nature. Indeed, her relationship with nature becomes so entrenched that it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish between woman and wilderness. As Rat Kiley observes: 'She had crossed to the other side. She was part of the land... She was dangerous. She was ready to kill.'<sup>35</sup> The feminine and nature literally merge together, united as a phenomenon both incomprehensible and dangerous to the American soldier.

Defeat in the new frontier, and its accompanying feminine Otherness, emasculated America, eroding its traditional, self-assurance, confidence and air of invulnerability. The sense of negativity continued throughout the 1970s, with internal catastrophes such as 'Watergate' and national recession depressing the American psyche further. However, American self-esteem began to change with the election of Ronald Reagan to President in 1981. Reagan was a more uncompromising figure than his predecessors, viewing the world and America's role within it in simple, traditional terms. As Stanley Hoffman has commented, Reagan attempted

'to find remedies in old verities: not in the spirit that led to past successes, but in the mythified recipes that worked before, in the rituals of national celebration... a rediscovery of traditional ways'<sup>36</sup> Reagan's renewal can be viewed almost as a return to simplistic, Puritan attitudes based on a distinct division between right and wrong. This was especially true when it came to foreign affairs, which saw little room for compromise with the 'evil' Soviet Union, thus lending credibility to David Larson's assertion that Reagan adopted a 'Puritan foreign policy.'<sup>37</sup>

Reagan's policies have often been criticised as being too simplistic, overly escapist and grounded in fantasy. Indeed, this is not so surprising when we consider Reagan's former career as a Hollywood actor, starring in films such as *Knute Rockne*, *All American*<sup>38</sup> and *Kings Row*.<sup>39</sup> Regardless of the validity of such claims, it certainly offered the opportunity for a renewal of American identity; a renewal that reached through to the depiction of wilderness in American war narratives. And, just as war narratives in America's imperial predecessor, Great Britain, transcended written texts to include formats such as vaudeville plays and music hall productions, so would American war narratives find new energy in the booming domain of film production. With rapid technical advancements such as special effects, an increase in film-viewing (encouraged by the

growth of home-viewing due to the advent of VCRs) and the election of a former Hollywood actor as their new president, Americans were presented with the perfect opportunity to re-confront the Otherness of frontier conflicts through cinematic narratives. Indeed, as newly elected US President Barack Obama only recently declared to a group of Hollywood executives: 'Don't sell yourselves short. You are the storytellers of our age.'<sup>40</sup>

Tony Scott's *Top Gun*,<sup>41</sup> is an excellent example of America's recovered self-esteem and the associated changes in perception of frontier conflicts. This fictional tale is primarily located in prosperous California, where the sun always shines, presenting a view in stark contrast to the characteristic tropes of Vietnam war narratives. However, as the story evolves, it becomes apparent that America is under threat from a communist attack somewhere over the Indian Ocean. Without hesitation America sends fighter jets to the region and duly wins an aerial battle against its communist rivals. To use Gaylyn Staller and David Desser's phrase, this return can be seen as America 'confronting the Otherness of Frontier Asia.'<sup>42</sup> What is more, the manner in which America returns to an area of the world, which had previously haunted the national psyche, to win a

military battle supports Slotkin's notion of 'regeneration through violence.'<sup>43</sup>

Furthermore, this 'regeneration' also sees a re-appraisal of the native environment. Indeed, no longer are American forces engulfed in the dark, murky Other typical of previous Vietnam War narratives. Instead, combat occurs in clear blue skies lit up by sunshine, effectively removing any sense of an unseen enemy lurking or lying in ambush. It can be argued that this simplicity of environment is symbolic of the return to a more positive and assured American global leadership as opposed to the previous sceptical and uncertain presidencies during the Vietnam conflict.

However, does *Top Gun* really offer us a changed perception of frontier conflicts? Certainly, fighter jets flying into clear blue skies and sunshine may represent a renewed, more positive and confident attitude in America's global position, but it remains an unfair comparison with traditional Vietnam War narratives. *Top Gun* is located solely in the sky, which, regardless of the state of the national psyche, is an infinitely different environment to the jungles of Vietnam. Moreover, it can be argued that America is still haunted by visions of the Vietnamese wilderness and has therefore sought refuge in the skies. The sky only

offers an escape route, though, and not a tangible solution. As Herr wrote in reference to the Vietnam War: 'We had the air, we could get up in it, but not disappear in *to* it, we could run but we couldn't hide.'<sup>44</sup>

*Rambo – First Blood: Part II*, directed by George P. Cosmatos,<sup>45</sup> takes the Reagan renewal a leap further. Again set in South-east Asia, John Rambo, the film's hero, not only 'gets to win this time', but also physically returns to the earthy wilderness of Vietnam.

The manner in which Rambo succeeds in the Vietnamese terrain carries strong resonances of the colonial victories chronicled in Frontier literature. As Slotkin explains: 'The most notable successes of the colonies were those obtained by men who... ventured boldly into the woods to fight the Indian on his own terms, far from the refuge of the coastal enclaves.'<sup>46</sup> Like the original heroes of these tales, such as Daniel Boone and Hawkeye, Rambo's victories occur in the heart of the jungle, far from anything that resembles a friendly haven. Similarly, Rambo is not reliant on technology to defeat his enemies, instead adopting the skills of the natives, defeating them with primitive weapons such as a bow and arrow and a bowie knife.

However, the chief reason for Rambo's success is that he is able to confront and master the Otherness of the Vietnamese wilderness. This is hugely significant, as the terrain is not rendered any more accommodating in this film than in previous narratives. As a fellow soldier reminds Rambo: '[You're] back in the badlands my man.' However, Rambo remains unflinching in this savage wilderness leading Colonel Trautman to declare to another officer: 'what you call hell, he calls home.' Decisively, Rambo manages to re-establish the terrain, which was once perceived as a threat to American life, in its traditional role as a provider and sustainer of life. Indeed, Rambo uses all the elements of the Vietnamese nature to aid him in his struggles, immersing himself entirely in either mud or water to ambush the enemy and emerging victorious in struggles in the air and with fire. As Studler and Desser remark: 'Rambo displays a privileged, magical relationship with the Third World wilderness not evidenced even by the Vietnamese.'<sup>47</sup>

As noted earlier, there are striking parallels between how the feminine and nature are characterised in Vietnam War narratives. For example, in *TTC*, Mary Anne proves more adept in acclimatising to Vietnam than her male counterparts. In a similar fashion to Mary Anne, Rambo also demonstrates an ability to immerse himself fully into nature, however, vital

differences remain. Whereas Mary Anne becomes a slave to the wilderness, unable to stop herself being absorbed into the nature, Rambo is able to master and manipulate nature to his benefit, yet remain detached enough to retain a clear focus on achieving success for his fellow Americans. Moreover, Rambo's 'Mr Universe' physique further refutes any suggestion his relationship with nature is based on shared feminine attributes.

Undeniably, Rambo is the celebration of the return and dominance of masculinity in the American war narrative. A striking example of this can be seen in the re-emergence of the Frontier captivity myth, in which a courageous male would rescue females being held captive by savage Indians. This myth is perfectly suited for dealing with the MIA (Missing In Action) issue in the film, with all the male MIA soldiers emasculated by their severe physical debilitation. As Tony Williams has observed: 'as a result, these new captivity victims become as impotent and passive as their female Puritan ancestors, symbolic substitutes for a government demasculinised as a result of military defeat.'<sup>48</sup> Indeed, the MIAs can only be rescued and have their masculinity restored by the ultra-masculine Rambo. This exaggerated return of the masculine is representative of the renewed images of strength associated with Reagan and the associated

change in perceptions of both America and its imperial frontiers. Moreover, the captivity myth in general can be seen as a symbolic analogy of the American experience of Vietnam; ambushed by the savage Vietnamese and held captive by their own government's inability to cope with the war, Rambo provides the fictional finale in returning to win a bloody siege. As Studler and Desser explain:

[S]anctified by the trial of captivity, the hunter confronts an Otherness, represented by the wilderness and the Indians, that threatens to assimilate him into barbarism [and emasculate him]. Through vengeance, he finds his identity – as a white, civilised, Christian male.<sup>49</sup>

It is important to note the preservation of Rambo's strong moral core. Although reduced to bare essentials in an alien environment, he is not tempted into the savagery of the enemy, like some soldiers were in *Dispatches* and *TTC*. Instead, the struggle strengthens Rambo's moral reserve, ensuring he remains linked to traditional white social values.

Finally, in a similar vein to *Top Gun*, representation of the American homeland is positive. Rambo may have his qualms with the way in which

war veterans like himself have been treated by the government, but he still declares his love for his country: 'I would die for this country'. This attitude is supported by Rambo's female *Vietnamese* partner, Co, who believes America to be a 'beautiful' and 'wonderful' country and pleads for Rambo to take her there.

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By comparing the war narratives of the Vietnam War and the Reagan presidency, one can clearly see how the first-hand accounts of Vietnam offer an interpretation of the wilderness in complete opposition to the fictional cinematic narratives produced during the Reagan administration. It would be easy to claim that these differences occurred simply because of each narrative's grounding and experience with reality. However, this author would like to propose the importance of the state of the national psyche as the crucial factor. Indeed, J. Wretford Watson and Timothy O'Riordan have argued that it is the "geography of the mind" that is more influential in an individual's relationship with an alien environment than the reality of the place itself.<sup>50</sup> Such a theory can be traced back to Puritan America where citizens would either rejoice in thunderstorms, or view them as a terrible omen, depending on the state of the community spirit at the time.<sup>51</sup> This theme continued during the Vietnam War. For

instance, Herr describes, how one American soldier, joyful, after surviving a lengthy siege, viewed the wilderness in a different way:

[T]hey were not the same hills that had surrounded him for the past ten months. They had held such fearful mystery for so long that when they were found to be peaceful again, they were transformed as greatly as if a flood had swept over them.<sup>52</sup>

The most dramatic transformation though, can be seen as a consequence of the differing American governments. The governments preceding Reagan were vague in their war aims,<sup>53</sup> leaving many Americans alienated and unsure of what was going on in Vietnam. In turn this estrangement and uncertainty manifested itself in how Americans viewed the wilderness of their Asian frontier. The election of Reagan and his return to simple, traditional principles, clarified the role of America to its citizens. This state of mind, now one of self-assuredness, again exhibited itself in changed cultural perceptions of the wilderness. Although it was still no Garden of Eden, America's renewed confidence resulted in the Vietnamese wilderness losing its more deadly and sinister overtones.

Furthermore, this phenomenon of imperial frontiers being regenerated from places of despair to places of hope through war narratives is a trend that possesses considerable salience in contemporary US culture. The recent Iraq War has arguably left a scar as deep and painful on the American psyche as Vietnam did and potential parallels between the war narratives of Vietnam and Iraq could be fascinating. How is the 'spirit of the place' of Iraq portrayed? Will differences be apparent between the fear-mongering presidency of George W. Bush and the hope-saturated administration of Barack Obama? And to what extent will changes in narrative formats influence these perceptions? In this last aspect, the comic book adaptation of the 9/11 Commission Report<sup>54</sup> and the increasing rate and ease of downloading movies offer intriguing pointers.

Finally, and to return to D.H. Lawrence's quote at the beginning of this article, it is without doubt that 'the spirit of the place is a great reality.' However, it is a changing reality. At times of trouble, the wilderness encountered in frontier conflicts can be overwhelming and deadly. In fact, at such times, it is not the competency of the enemy that kills, but rather the very Otherness of the surroundings; the wilderness, the nature, and the femininity of mother Earth. Indeed, the symbiosis between the feminine and nature is of particular interest, with both portrayed as

incomprehensible and antithetical to the progressive, industrialised and masculine empire; a threat that can undermine the self-assuredness and clarity of vision deemed necessary for successful empire. Yet in contrast, during times of confidence, nature no longer poses a threat to the poised and self-confident empire (*Top Gun*) and can even be actively embraced to the advantage of the centrifugal imperial power (*Rambo*). Perhaps, therefore, the most fundamental finding we can derive from an exploration of the characterisation of the Asian frontier in American war narratives is that nature does not exist in its own right, but is rather nothing more than a reflection of the prevailing cultural attitudes towards imperial strength and confidence.

# Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> 'Confronting the Otherness of Frontier Asia': STUDLAR, G. & DESSER, D. (1990) Never Having to Say You're Sorry: Rambo's Rewriting of the Vietnam War. IN DITTMAR, L. & MICHAUD, G. (Eds.) *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film*. London, Rutgers University Press., p.107  
The author would like to thank Joris Verdonck for his incisive comments on earlier versions of this article.
- <sup>2</sup> LAWRENCE, D. H. (1924) *Studies in Classic American Literature*, London, Heinemann. p.1
- <sup>3</sup> PARKMAN, F. ([1846] 1910) *The Oregon Trail. The Works of Francis Parkman*. Revised ed. Boston, Little, Brown and Co.
- <sup>4</sup> COOPER, J. F. ([1823-1842] 1985) *The Leatherstocking Tales*, New York, Library of America.
- <sup>5</sup> MCCLUNG, J. A. (1839) *Sketches of Western Adventure*, Cincinnati, U.P. James.
- <sup>6</sup> TURNER, F. J. (1935) *The Frontier in American History*, New York, Henry Holt and Company.
- <sup>7</sup> HERR, M. (1977) *Dispatches*, London, Picador.
- <sup>8</sup> O'BRIEN, T. (1991) *The Things They Carried*, London, Flamingo.
- <sup>9</sup> HERR, M. (1977) *Dispatches*, London, Picador. p.62
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid.p.79
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid. p.62
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid. p.153
- <sup>13</sup> TANNER, T. (1987) *Scenes of Nature, Signs of Men*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. p.2
- <sup>14</sup> HERR, M. (1977) *Dispatches*, London, Picador.p.19
- <sup>15</sup> O'BRIEN, T. (1991) *The Things They Carried*, London, Flamingo. p.72
- <sup>16</sup> CHEN, T. (1998) Unravelling the Deeper Meaning: Exile and the Embodied Poetics of Displacement in Tim O'Brien's 'The Things They Carried'. *Contemporary Literature*, 39, 77-98. p.95
- <sup>17</sup> HERR, M. (1977) *Dispatches*, London, Picador. pp.19-20
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid. pp.11-12
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid. p.125
- <sup>20</sup> See: PRITCHARD, R. (1997) The World Beyond Measure: An Ecological Critique of Tim O'Brien's 'The Things They Carried'. *Critical Survey*, 9. p.5
- <sup>21</sup> Interesting, many environmentalists have rejected this theory, claiming it propagates a disregard for the environment.
- <sup>22</sup> HERR, M. (1977) *Dispatches*, London, Picador. p.59
- <sup>23</sup> O'BRIEN, T. (1991) *The Things They Carried*, London, Flamingo. p.79
- <sup>24</sup> PRITCHARD, R. (1997) The World Beyond Measure: An Ecological Critique of Tim O'Brien's 'The Things They Carried'. *Critical Survey*, 9. p.5
- <sup>25</sup> O'BRIEN, T. (1991) *The Things They Carried*, London, Flamingo. p.170
- <sup>26</sup> SLOTKIN, R. (1973) *Regeneration Through Violence*, Middletown, Connecticut, Wesleyan University Press. p.55
- <sup>27</sup> HERR, M. (1977) *Dispatches*, London, Picador. p.161
- <sup>28</sup> O'BRIEN, T. (1991) *The Things They Carried*, London, Flamingo. p.125
- <sup>29</sup> HERR, M. (1977) *Dispatches*, London, Picador. p.80
- <sup>30</sup> O'BRIEN, T. (1991) *The Things They Carried*, London, Flamingo. p.76
- <sup>31</sup> PRITCHARD, R. (1997) The World Beyond Measure: An Ecological Critique of Tim O'Brien's 'The Things They Carried'. *Critical Survey*, 9. p.10
- <sup>32</sup> O'BRIEN, T. (1991) *The Things They Carried*, London, Flamingo. p.217
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid. p.90
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid. p.103
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid. p.107
- <sup>36</sup> Quoted in: DALLEK, R. (1984) *Ronald Reagan: The Politics of Symbolism*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press. p.163
- <sup>37</sup> LARSON, D. L. (1986) *The Puritan Ethic in United States Foreign Policy*, New York, Norstand.
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- <sup>43</sup> SLOTKIN, R. (1973) *Regeneration Through Violence*, Middletown, Connecticut, Wesleyan University Press.
- <sup>44</sup> HERR, M. (1977) *Dispatches*, London, Picador. p.19
- <sup>45</sup> COSMATUS, G. P. (1985) *Rambo - First Blood: Part II*. United States of America.
- <sup>46</sup> SLOTKIN, R. (1973) *Regeneration Through Violence*, Middletown, Connecticut, Wesleyan University Press. p.88
- <sup>47</sup> STUDLAR, G. & DESSER, D. (1990) Never Having to Say You're Sorry: Rambo's Rewriting of the Vietnam War. IN DITTMAR, L. & MICHAUD, G. (Eds.) *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film*. London, Rutgers University Press. p.108
- <sup>48</sup> WILLIAMS, T. Ibid. Missing in Action: The Vietnam Construction of the Movie Star. p.134
- <sup>49</sup> STUDLAR, G. & DESSER, D. Ibid. Never Having to Say You're Sorry: Rambo's Rewriting of the Vietnam War. p.108
- <sup>50</sup> WREFORD WATSON, J. & O'RIORDAN, T. (1976) *The American environment: Perceptions and policies* New York, John Wiley.
- See also: PRITCHARD, R. (1997) The World Beyond Measure: An Ecological Critique of Tim O'Brien's 'The Things They Carried'. *Critical Survey*, 9. p.8
- <sup>51</sup> SLOTKIN, R. (1973) *Regeneration Through Violence*, Middletown, Connecticut, Wesleyan University Press. p.117-118
- <sup>52</sup> HERR, M. (1977) *Dispatches*, London, Picador. pp.132-133
- <sup>53</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson (1963-69), Richard M. Nixon (1969-74) and to a lesser extent Gerald R. Ford (1974-77)
- <sup>54</sup> JACOBSON, S. & COLON, E. (2006) *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation*, New York, Hill and Wang.

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