

Runaways from Tarzan Country: Redefinition of American Manhood in Tim O'Brien's *Going after Cacciato*

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Abstract

Tim O'Brien's second novel, *Going after Cacciato* (1978), narrates the GI characters' magical journey from the Vietnam War battlefields to Paris that Paul Berlin, the protagonist, supposedly fantasizes during his one night's sentry duty. In this essay, a special focus is given to an episode, in which one of Berlin's fellow GIs likens the land of Vietnam to Tarzan's African jungle. As numerous reproductions of Edgar Rice Burroughs's Tarzan story convey what Kenneth B. Kidd calls the feral tale, the moral message of which is an ideal model for American boys' passage into manhood, I argue that O'Brien's narrative of the GIs who escape from the Vietnam warzones/Tarzan country challenges America's conventional ideas about masculinity.

Furthermore, finding a similarity between Tarzan's feral tale and the frontier myth, America's dominant national creation myth that romanticizes early European settlers' violence against Native Americans, this essay examines the ways in which O'Brien undermines the imperialist and racist assumptions inscribed in those mythical tales that shape Americans' ideas about ideal manhood. Narrating, in parallel, the excessively severe realities of the war that subvert the GIs' pre-war expectations, their escape from the Vietnamese terrain, and the failure of the protagonist's first initiation into the frontier in his childhood, O'Brien delineates the plight of American foot soldiers who are no longer able to identify with the heroic frontiersmen's masculine virtues. O'Brien's reflection upon the nature of American manhood results in a frustrating and cynical self-portrayal of a new generation of Americans whose attempts to identify with the

myth of the nation's exceptional goodness and power are destined for failure.

Keywords

Twentieth-Century American Literature, The Vietnam War, Tim O'Brien,
Post-Colonialism, Men's Studies

I. Introduction: Is Vietnam a Tarzan Country?¹⁾

In the beginning of the GIs' magical journey to Paris taking place in Tim O'Brien's second novel *Going after Cacciato* (1978), one of the protagonist's comrades utters a remark that implies O'Brien's challenge to America's conventional ideas about war and masculinity. When Cacciato, an "[o]pen-faced and naïve and plump" soldier whom Paul Berlin, the protagonist, describes as retaining "a strange, boyish simplicity" has gone AWOL [Absent Without Official Leave], declaring a personal ceasefire and embarking upon a seemingly impossible journey from Vietnam to Paris, the protagonist and his fellow GIs of Third Squad begin to pursue the deserter (8). Following Cacciato's westward migration, the GIs leave Vietnamese heavy combat zones and step into a relatively calm mountainous area of the country:

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

In the scene above, Eddie Lazzuti's remark that Vietnam is "Tarzan country" is especially worth noting, for, in the figure of the one of the most famous heroes of American popular culture, O'Brien locates a dominant American discourse about ideal manhood whose legitimacy he sharply questions.

Tim O'Brien has doubtlessly been considered one of the most acclaimed American authors to write about the Vietnam War. After the publication of his first book *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* (1973)—a memoir about his own tour of duty taking place between 1969 and 1970—O'Brien has merged his personal experience with literary imagination to create works of fiction whose plots centre around the ordeals and the memories of the people who were, in various ways, involved in the war. Whilst, with a few exceptions such as Philip Caputo, Stephen Wright, Robert Olen Butler, and Tobias Wolfe, many Vietnam-vet writers finished their short literary career after writing one or two memoirs or autobiographical fictions, O'Brien has constantly produced novels and short stories and succeeded in obtaining both an extensive readership and critical acclaim, from his first novel *Northern Lights* (1975) to his latest novel *July July* (2002).²⁾ In particular, his second novel, *Going after Cacciato*, which won the National Book Award in 1979, helped make O'Brien one of the most important writers arising from the aftermath of the Vietnam War. Even though it was not an immediate commercial success, it received favourable reviews by notable critics and writers. Upon its publication, John Updike praised *Going after Cacciato* as "reaching for a masterpiece" (Updike 130). Ever since, along with Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (1977), Caputo's *A Rumor of War* (1977), and a few others published between the late '70s and the early '80s, *Going after Cacciato* has been considered to be a work of American Vietnam War Literature garnering

near-canonical status. The fiction judges of the National Book Award—Alison Lurie, Mary Lee Settle, and Wallace Stegner—stated that “His [O’Brien’s] irony recalls that of Stendhal, his landscape have the breadth and scope of Tolstoy’s and the essential American wonder and innocence of his vision deserve to stand beside that of Stephen Crane” (qtd. in “Tim O’Brien” 151). As such, the novel has been mentioned in almost every book-length study of the genre.

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

Since Philip D. Beidler’s pioneering work, *American Literature and the Experience of Vietnam* (1982), *Going after Cacciato* has been discussed in terms closely related to America’s history, myth and their revisions. In Beidler’s case, however, as his framework almost solely places emphasis on the ways in which myth and preceding works prefigure American Vietnam War experience rather than differences and revisions that Vietnam writers have brought to the tradition, he fails to define what exactly the act of “cultural myth-making” is, except for stating that it is a new generation of American writers’ literary experiments in representing the war and its

aftermath (Beidler xi). In examining *Going after Cacciato*, Beidler regards it as literature of “optative mode,” which is distinguished from earlier American writings of Vietnam. O’Brien’s novel, on one hand, possesses unswerving allegiance to “the experiential particular” of the war; on the other, it has “a distinct sense of self-conscious literary contrivance” that leads to “an awareness [...] of the inherent artificiality of sense-making considered in terms of any formal articulative design” (Beidler 140). Nevertheless, other than asserting the exactitude of the details of Vietnam combat experiences described in the novel that Beidler, as a Vietnam-vet himself, can testify, and outlining the book’s narrative structure, he does not explain exactly how O’Brien’s work relates to the myth and preceding works of American literature, an issue that a writer possessing “a distinct sense of self-conscious literary contrivance” must confront.

John Hellmann more convincingly discusses O’Brien’s complex relationship with America’s dominant assumption about its own history. Asserting that the myth of the frontier, a collection of stories that romanticize early European settlers’ violence against Native Americans in the New World wilderness, and that have been reproduced countless in various media, is one of the United States’ most persistent stories retaining the people’s images of themselves, Hellmann argues that Vietnam in *Going after Cacciato* is an “anti-frontier”—with its complete lack of any sense of victory and justice on the part of Americans: a completely inverted world of American frontier mythology that frustrates all of the protagonist’s expectations (Hellmann 161). Moreover, examining the ways in which Paul Berlin’s father, a veteran of World War II, embodies the images of a good war and a good society deriving from the frontier myth, Hellmann investigates how Berlin’s escape from the

war in Vietnam destabilizes America's idealized self-concept of its own culture and history. Katherine Kinney's discussion is also worth noting in that it acutely analyses both the novel's implication in and its challenges to the myth of America's exceptionalism. Kinney criticizes Hellmann for regarding the Vietnam War as an aberration from the logic of America's history, rather than the consequence of its imperialism masked by the myth of America's innocence and good wars. Contending that *Going after Cacciato* is—along with Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men* (1980) and Joan Didion's *Democracy* (1984)—“the most complex and self-conscious examples of the allegorical treatment of American imperialism in Vietnam War narratives,” Kinney closely examines the GIs' journey across the continent that Berlin fantasizes and the memories of traumatic incidents in the war that occasionally invade the protagonist's imagination (Kinney 44). According to Kinney, Berlin struggles to contain inconvenient paradoxes—(e.g. Paris, the GIs' ultimate destination, is both the symbol of America's innocence manifested by the victory over fascism in World War II and the origin of the West's imperial rule over Vietnam)—that subvert his wish to believe in the United States' essential goodness. However, the novel's plot such as the detention in Iran, where the GIs face the danger of execution by SAVAK officers—the creature of the covert CIA-led coup to overthrow democratically elected, nationalist government of Muhammad Musaddique in favour of the puppet regime of the Shah—nevertheless reveals the history of American imperialism that has been made invisible by the myth of America's exceptionalism (Kinney 52–57).

By referring to the analyses mentioned above, I will investigate the ways in which O'Brien's *Going after Cacciato* questions the conventional US ideas

about manhood and heroism. As discussed below, central in O'Brien's novel is its attack on the myth of the feral hero—stories of a man endowed with the great physical strength of savages/animals to kill/injure while retaining distinctly aristocratic European blood. This type of narrative, as will be elaborated shortly, has closely been associated with yet another powerful myth, the frontier mythology. Especially, it is related to what cultural historian Richard Slotkin calls “the ranger mystique” of the frontier, which constitutes a significant part of the distinctive characteristic of the American hero. Not only does O'Brien question the traditional concept of masculinity in American society, but he also attempts to redefine the meaning of authentic American manhood in the economic expansion of the post-World War II era.

II. Runaways from Tarzan Country

In the scene quoted at the very beginning, Lazzuti likens the Vietnamese natural landscape to Tarzan's jungle. Admittedly, this analogy in part comes from the seeming similarities between the image of African jungle in Tarzan saga and the Vietnamese tropical natural world: both stories take place in a remote rainforest replete with “trees, thick grass, vines and wet thickets.” The GIs are now walking away from perilous combat zones. Therefore, a sense of security may well let Lazzutti fully appreciate the picturesque beauty of the land, and he utters it half in jest and half in awe of the foreign landscape, kinds of which he must have seen in movies or on Television in his childhood. Nevertheless, Lazzutti's remark also suggests the existence of a peculiar ideological formula that frames Americans' perception of a foreign land and culture.

Since the publication of the first novel of the series, *Tarzan of the Apes*

(1914), the stories of Tarzan—originally a creation of American pulp fiction writer Edgar Rice Burroughs—have been reproduced in various media as one of the most popular adventure tales for American youth. Narrating the violent adventures and chivalrous romance of the eponymous white protagonist reared by Kala, a female ape who lost her own baby, in African jungle, Tarzan stories are typical of what Kenneth Kidd calls “*the feral tale*, a narrative form derived from mythology and folklore that dramatizes the ‘wildness’ of boys” (Kidd 1). Although the feral tale is a transcultural phenomenon that can be found in various regions outside the United States, Kidd contends that its American versions have formed a hegemonic discourse that played a central role in the formation of American boyhood in the twentieth century. According to Kidd, the moral message that the audience or reader receive from the feral tale is an ideal model for American boys’ passage to manhood, since it enacts “the white, middle-class male’s perilous passage from nature to culture, from bestiality to humanity, from homosocial pack life to individual self-reliance and heterosexual prowess—that is, from boyhood to manhood” (Kidd 7). In other words, it is a strong ideological formula that works to exclude/discriminate the gender/class/racial/sexual minorities who do not belong to the dominant group—white, middle class, athletic, heterosexual males—that it approves. Likewise, Tarzan represents “an impossible ideal of American masculinity and its racist, imperialistic, classist underpinnings that sometimes go unmarked: he is aristocratic yet not effete, savage but not barbaric, wild but not native, and civilized but not feminized” (Wannamaker 38). As Wannamaker maintains, although the “overtly racist, imperialistic, social-Darwinist” messages of Burroughs’s original text have undergone considerable modifications in its

later adaptations (38), all the Tarzan stories—including Johnny Weissmuller's iconic film series as well as Disney's animated cartoon produced in 1999—nevertheless impart the moral lessons that the feral tale has conventionally offered (58–66).

At this point, it is particularly important to suggest that there are striking similarities between Tarzan's feral tale and the stories of gallant soldiers that abound in the myth of the frontier. Especially, the characteristics of Tarzan that made him America's most popular feral boy have much in common with those of the frontier ranger-type warriors. Both the feral hero and American rangers are imagined to be distinct from and stronger than effeminate Europeans corrupted by modern civilization. Tarzan is brought up by apes in the African jungle, and thus has attained great, almost bestial, physical strength to hunt and kill that his European rivals can never attain. Burroughs describes Tarzan's robust physique and gallantry in ways that make a striking contrast with the weakness of his cousin Clayton, noble but powerless English man (Wannamaker 55). Likewise, American rangers are thought to excel "regular" Army or their European counterparts, since the frontier fighters developed distinctly rugged physique and acquired a strong, aggressive spirit through their contact as well as conflict with Native Americans in the primitive environment of the American West. Richard Slotkin argues that "the ranger mystique"—the myth of frontier rangers who acquired the strength and guerrilla tactics of their perennial enemy, Native Americans—has been central in the construction of US Army's institutional identity, since the legend enabled it to distinguish itself from its European rivals, while providing itself with a symbolical authority as the country's legitimate force (Slotkin 453–55). According to Slotkin, "[b]y dressing and

fighting as Indians, the ranger appropriated the savage's power and American nativity for himself and turned it against both savage and redcoat" (Slotkin 455). It is also worth noting that in the formative years of United States' counterinsurgency doctrine (1956-60), military planners organized Army Special Forces or "Green Berets" as specialists of unconventional warfare in post-colonial setting, by extensively deriving its styles and tactics of guerrilla campaign from the ranger commando tradition (Slotkin 453-55). At the same time, although both Tarzan and American soldiers appropriate the power of natives or beasts, they are conceived to be different from, and superior to the "barbaric" forces. Tarzan, alias lord Graystoke, is a son of British aristocrat John Clayton and his wife Alice, and his name means "White Skin" in the language of Apes (Burroughs 38). Tarzan is always described as possessing "genetically superior" abilities than both apes and the indigenous Africans. With his great physical strength, the feral boy soon becomes the lord of apes, but his chivalry and intelligence make a striking contrast with both excessively violent apes and superstitious Africans imagined by Burroughs (Wannamaker 47-53). In like manner, the images of American soldiers are clearly distinguished from "ignorant" natives who are considered to be living outside civilization. For instance, in the introductory part of *The Green Beret* (1965), a best-selling American Vietnam War Combat romance that dramatizes the Special Forces men's violence against native inhabitants in Vietnam, Robin Moore describes members of Army Special Force as tough warriors, the legitimate descendants of the mythic frontier rangers, who excel in primitive, hand-to-hand fighting. Simultaneously, however, Moore does not fail to explain that Green Berets are also skilled in the use of latest technologies such as engineering, medicine, and heavy-weapons, and

therefore are different from the local people who “have never seen anything more modern than a crossbow” (Moore 17).

As examined above, there are striking similarities between Tarzan’s feral tale and the myth of frontier warriors. Moreover, as the conventional images of rangers who become “real” American fighters in the uncivilized frontier fit into the second category of “three overlapping types of feral subjects in oral and written [feral tale] narratives” that Kidd explains—“those fostered by wild animals, those living outside of civilization, and those living in confinement within its borders” (Kidd 3), we should be justified in asserting that the ranger mystique is a variation of the feral tale, and thus contains the same kinds of imperial, racist messages embedded in Tarzan’s tales. Lazzutti figures Vietnam in terms of America’s typical heroic fantasy. This seems to be a small, carefree joke that may well be dismissed soon from the minds of both the GIs and readers. Nevertheless, I contend that, by making Lazzutti utter the remark, O’Brien implies the persistence of particularly American ideology that shapes the GIs’ perception of the land and people of Vietnam, and that also imposes the conventional role of heroic warriors upon American youth. In other words, Lazzutti and his fellow comrades have internalized the discourse of the feral tale as well as the frontier myth that pervades the Vietnam generation GIs’ mind as an authentic model for their behaviour in the warzone, or a frame of reference for measuring the legitimacy of their actions. In so doing, they understand US military’s actions in the Vietnam War in close association with the conventional tales of masculine heroes fighting in frontier-like uncivilized landscapes. Therefore, when O’Brien’s character regards the foreign Vietnamese terrain as Tarzan country, he, in effect, projects an image of the mythic Indian War battlefield onto Vietnam in

that he imagines it to be a space where American males are expected to demonstrate their feral manhood by bravely fighting off “barbaric” Vietnamese foes. While American politicians, military authorities and media described Vietnam in terms of the frontier mythology and imposed the name of “Indian Country” on Vietnam (Fitzgerald 367–68), the GIs of O’Brien’s generation, the baby boomers, who grew up in the midst of the post-World War II affluence and the inundation of the popular culture more aptly regard Vietnam as “Tarzan Country.” In their pursuit of Cacciato, however, Paul Berlin and his comrades find themselves going AWOL, becoming deserters from “Tarzan Country.” By describing the group of GIs who escape from the battlefield, the book attempts to undermine the ways in which the discourse of the feral tale and the frontier myth impose conventional concepts of courage and heroism upon American youth.

III. Paul Berlin as an Anti-Feral Hero

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

Unlike American feral heroes who excels in pre-modern ways of life in wilderness, Paul Berlin is a mediocrity who loves the comforts that the city offers. In one of “The Observation Post” chapters, which narrate Berlin’s one-

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

Furthermore, in contrast to conventional US feral heroes possessing a strong sense of self-reliance and willpower, Berlin is portrayed as a passive, lethargic character who almost lacks the self-will essential for the protagonist of traditional combat romances. The narrator describes the protagonist's motives as "shapeless as water," and states that Berlin has spent his life before Vietnam without any strong sense of self-determination and reality, as if "drifting" and "sleepwalking" (226-27). Both in the feral tale and the frontier myth, the landscape of wilderness is imagined to be a locus wherein white male heroes shed off the ennui of decadent European cities and develop exceptionally strong physique and spirit through the contact with the harsh forces of nature and "savage" natives. However, the land of Vietnam in O'Brien's novel by no means transforms the protagonist, an "average" American boy, into a strong feral hero.

A close reading of the chapter titled "The Way It Mostly Was" will

illuminate the ways that O'Brien attempts to depict the Vietnamese land as a sort of anti-frontier, an inverted Tarzan country. The chapter belongs to the "realistic" part of the novel, and narrates the GIs' prolonged mountain-climbing march toward a heavy combat zone where they are expected to fight with deadly Vietcong Guerrillas. The Vietnamese mountainous landscape that the GIs trudge upon is a tropical forest presented as picturesque as Tarzan's jungle: "The view [is] magnificent, and along the road grew many forms of tropical foliage, and everywhere it [is] wild country and pure" (160). Besides, the narrator initially seems to bestow a mythic significance upon the GIs' march:

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

In the beginning of the episode, the narrator repeatedly mentions that the GIs are heading toward western battlefield, and thus carefully evokes the images of the Wild West, as if the soldiers are re-enacting the mythic fathers' westward migration. The forces of the Vietnamese natural world—the scorching sun, heat, and drifting dust—apparently look as severe as those in the New World wilderness. However, O'Brien soon undermines the vision of Vietnam as an extension of American frontier or Tarzan country wherein American youth fulfil their mythic roles.

The episode is narrated from two different viewpoints: Lieutenant Sydney Martin, the leader of the squad, observing his subordinate GIs' march from a vantage point, and Berlin walking the trail in the very rear of the column. Martin, a young graduate of West Point, is a diligent officer whose "[p]ride" is "strength of will" (165). His unflinching devotion to "the old rules of command" represents allegiance to America's military ideals (163). Thus, his appreciation of "the enduring appeal of battle" that war, "the chance to confront death many times," makes men heroic is congruous to the logic of the feral tale/the ranger mystique in that both of the discourses regard violent confrontation with the enemy as an essential component of the formation of authentic American manhood (163). Among all the marching infantrymen, Martin spots a soldier whose name he cannot remember trudging up the hill in the end of the column, and "admire[s] the oxen persistent with witch the last soldier ... march[es]" (167-68). Watching the GI's heavy, but steady steps Martin deepens his conviction that war makes men real heroes: he "think[s] that the boy represent[s] so much good—fortitude, discipline, loyalty, self-control, courage, toughness. The greatest gift of God, th[inks] the lieutenant in admiration of Private First Class Paul Berlin's marching, is freedom of will" (167-68). In Martin's vision, Berlin and his fellow GIs have undergone a trial in the wilderness, and are now becoming heroic soldiers whose courage, toughness, and power of will are comparable to those of the mythic fathers.

Nevertheless, when the narrative's focal point shifts from Martin to Berlin, the young lieutenant's lofty vision is subverted by the prosaic reality of war that the foot soldiers experience. The narrator explains that the anonymous GI whom Martin observes is Paul Berlin, and depicts the foot soldiers'

marching from his point of view, thereby contradicting the lieutenant's perspective. Although Martin admires Berlin for his strenuous effort as demonstrating strong willpower appropriate for an exemplary American soldier, Berlin in fact keeps walking by completely different mechanism. The narrator explains that, contrary to Martin's assumption, "He [Berlin] marche[s] up the road with no exercise of will, no desire and no determination, no pride, just legs and lungs, climbing without thought, without will and without purpose" (167). Berlin, who "kn[ows] he w[ill] not fight well," and who "ha[s] no love for mission" wishes to stop walking and fall out from the column and the war. He nevertheless keeps moving, not because of his fortitude and willpower, but merely because his comrades are also marching (167). Berlin feels as if he is "drawn by some physical force— inertia or herd affinity or magnetic attraction" (167). The conflict between the lieutenant's and the GI's visions aptly exemplifies O'Brien's attempt to undermine America's imperial imagination to represent the land of Vietnam as an extension of the mythic frontier. Berlin, just like the feral boy or the frontiersman, is displaced from cities and moved to a foreign land that is supposed to be outside civilization. However, neither the contact with the land of Vietnam nor the deadly battles against the enemy transform the protagonist into a strong-willed warrior celebrated in American mythic tales. In spite of all the combat experiences in Vietnam, Berlin is still described as an "average" American, who, just like himself before the war, lacks strong sense of self-reliance, and is drifting and sleepwalking in the midst of the war. A genuinely courageous act that he could perform, implies the author, is to stop walking and desert the war. Nevertheless, being "dull of mind, blunt of spirit, numb of history," Berlin automatically continues marching. Describing

the character of Berlin in ways that oppose the stereotypical images of the American hero, O'Brien tries to destabilize the myth of the feral tale and the image of Vietnam as American men's ultimate athletic field. Notwithstanding Lazzutti's remark, Vietnam in O'Brien's *Going after Cacciato* is no Tarzan country that trains American youth to become a robust feral warrior.

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

warriors (120). Female and African characters in Tarzan stories are bereft of agency and oftentimes described as the weak and inferior whose images serve to admire the hero's prowess or to justify his mastery over them. Thus, both the land of Vietnam and the magical adventure to Paris for O'Brien's protagonist are portrayed as an inverted Tarzan world that completely contradicts traditional formulas of the feral tale.

IV. Berlin's Failed Initiation into the Frontier

Depicting the protagonist helplessly struggling to survive in Vietnam, O'Brien counters the discourse of the feral tale and the frontier myth that celebrates white men's regeneration through violence in uncivilized landscapes. In so doing, O'Brien takes his critique of America's most powerful myth further and tries to reconsider the legitimacy of the national foundation myth as defining the country's essential characteristics. O'Brien's attempt will be clearer when we look at Berlin's camping experience in his childhood. By narrating Berlin's frustrating struggle in Vietnam and his childhood camping experience in American frontier landscape in parallel, the author asserts that, for American youth of the Vietnam War generation, the frontier is no longer a home to return to, a symbolic landscape that defines the exceptional goodness and power of American men. Instead, it is banal, mundane townscape of American suburbs and its commercial amusements that shape the essence of American manhood.

The protagonist's memories of his childhood are inserted between Berlin's imagined journey to Paris and flashbacks of violent incidents of the war. One episode features Berlin's camping experience with his father in the pristine woods along Des Moines River in Iowa. As John Hellmann argues, the

protagonist's father, a veteran of World War II who fought in France, is closely associated with the landscapes of American frontier, and embodies both "the mythic concepts of a good society and a good war" that the frontier experience and the western migration have been considered to foster (Hellmann 162). At once closely related to the triumph of the war and the images of a liberator and goodness that America represented therein, the father is Berlin's guide who initiates his son into the life and the spirit of the American frontier. At the camping site, both the father and the son participate in a recreational workshop in which they experience Native Americans' ways of hunting and gathering. Berlin and his father acquire Indian-like nicknames—"Little Bear" and "Big Bear" respectively—and join various activities such as canoe racing and campfire. By entering the frontier landscape and undergoing the trials therein, little Berlin is to perform his duty of experiencing feral boyhood and appropriate Native Americans' survival skills in wilderness. Whereupon he is expected to evolve into a man of great power and spirit, an "authentic" American male who fulfils the role of the feral hero celebrated in the nation's popular mythology.

Regarding this episode, it is important to remember that, in their pursuit of Cacciato, the GIs' ultimate destination is Paris, France. Being a place that reminds America of its innocent, glorious victory over fascist Nazis in World War II, it implies Berlin's wish to relate to the myth of America's just wars and its heroic warriors. However, Paris, at the same time, represents things quite contrary to the American myth of its essential goodness. It is, firstly, one of the centres of European metropolises whose corruption and feminizing effects America's mythic fathers rejected. More importantly, Paris is also a site that "marks a return to the origins of the Vietnam War, the seat of the

French Empire which sought to re-establish its control over the land, resources, and people of Vietnam at the close of World War” (Kinney 48). As the former imperial centre of French colonial Indochina, along with the memory of the triumphant victory in World War II, Paris inevitably brings back the memory of the West’s colonial rule over Southeast Asia. Furthermore, since it was a site for Treaty of Paris in 1898, the city also reminds America of its own colonial dominance in the Pacific and East Asia starting with the acquisition of Spanish colonies—Puerto Rico, the West Indies, the island of Guam, and the Philippines—and thus the GIs’ journey to Paris prompts the reader to interpret the United States’ military intervention in Vietnam as its latest colonial enterprise. The protagonist’s attempt to connect with America’s myth of exceptional goodness and power, therefore, involves the grave contradiction, and is doomed to end up in failure.

Accordingly, little Berlin’s initiation into the frontier also turns out to be utterly fruitless. In parallel with the episodes of the GIs’ escape from the battlefield and flashbacks of his fellow GIs’ tragic deaths, the narrator recounts Berlin’s embarrassing memory of his getting lost in a mock Indian ritual of hunting: “Then the third day, into the woods, father first and son second, Little Bear tracking Big Bear, who leaves tracks and paw prints. Yes, he [Berlin] remember[s] it—Little Bear getting lost. Lost, bawling in the woods” (40–41). His initiation into the frontier fails, and Berlin is thus disqualified as an heir to America’s mythic legacy whose values are represented by the figure of his immediate father. In this way, by describing Berlin as an anti-feral hero who fails in his attempts to connect to the legacy of the frontier, O’Brien questions the legitimacy of the myth of the feral hero and the frontier rangers as America’s master narrative that predominantly

informs American youth's passage into manhood. Instead of the legacy of the frontier, what O'Brien finds to be the most cogent value that defines the character of the protagonist is rather pedestrian, commercialistic ways of life in the city. After being rescued and leaving the camping field with his father, little Berlin finds tremendous relief in getting back to familiar, ordinary objects of suburban life: "Hamburgers and root beer on the long drive home, baseball talk, white men talk, and he remember[s] it, the sickness going away. Pals forever" (41). These mediocre commodities of American corporate capitalism, in Berlin's eyes, represent home, and appear more genuinely American than the strenuous life in the frontier woods.

V. Conclusion

In *Going after Cacciato*, O'Brien challenges America's conventional ideas about masculinity and heroism that are closely tied to the myth of the frontier and its popular variations. O'Brien poses a significant question about the true meaning of American manhood in the post-World War II United States. The author's reflection upon the nature of American men in *Going after Cacciato* results in a frustrating and cynical self-portrayal of a new generation of Americans whose attempts to relate to the myth of the nation's exceptional goodness and power are destined for failure. By paralleling the protagonist's failed initiation to the life of the frontier hunters with the GIs' escape from Tarzan country, the Vietnam-vet author suggests that what shapes the character of American manhood is not the mythic frontier spirit that drove early settlers to move westward, conquering the hostile Indians and the untamed wilderness, the experience that historian Fredrick Jackson Turner and his protégés extolled as the basis of the nation's democratic character,

but rather the mundane suburban life replete with commodities of corporate America.

Notes

- 1) This essay is a revision of the first half of “Walking Away from Tarzan Country and Entering into Thoreauvian Woods: Tim O’Brien’s Two Desertion Narratives: *Going after Cacciato* and *On the Rainy River*,” a part of my doctoral thesis, *Vietnam Fought and Imagined: The Image of Mythic Western Frontier in American Vietnam War Literature*, originally submitted to University of Glasgow in December 2013.
- 2) After a long hiatus in writing a book-length work, in October 2019 O’Brien published *Dad’s Maybe Book*, a memoir or a collection of essays based on the letters he wrote to his two sons. The book recounts O’Brien’s life, his experience as a foot soldier in Vietnam, and his insight into the art of writing.

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