Refoliating Vietnam in the Post-9/11 American Homeland: Debra Granik's *Leave No Trace*

Kodai Abe

The spectacular images of terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, evoked a variety of cultural and historical memories in regulating the shock. For most spectators all over the world, the conventional aesthetics of the Hollywood film, an American product par excellence, ironically served as the handiest framework to register the sublime event. Most Americans remembered the recent domestic terrorist bombing in Oklahoma City in 1995. The 9/11 attack, some observed, was the worst intelligence failure and a cunning surprise attack ever since Pearl Harbor. Others immediately feared that it might be caused by nuclear weapons, and the collapses of the twin towers reminded them of the two mushroom clouds above Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The designation of "ground zero" soon followed. Thomas Franklin's photograph of three firefighters raising an American flag on the rubble of the World Trade Center was shortlisted for a Pulitzer Prize, echoing Joe Rosenthal's Pulitzer Prize–winning composition capturing US marines atop Iwo Jima during World War II. Such visual associations of 9/11 with other historical events often facilitated the reinforcing of American exceptionalism—the mythic idea that the United States is young, innocent, benign, and unique—through

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strategic manipulation of the cultural contexts in which those images are represented to elicit specific affective reactions. Conjuring an array of traumatic American victimhood as well as its "good" and "just" use of military force, the United States secured national support for the reinvigoration of militarism under the aegis of the war on terror, thereby rationalizing, sanctifying, and perpetuating its violence. As Joseph Darda argues in examining 9/11 visual productions, the Bush administration manufactured "exceptionalist optics"; it succeeded in orchestrating our "unconscious optics" (per Walter Benjamin) when looking at 9/11 images such as Franklin's so as to acknowledge and subscribe to American exceptionalism.[1] National hegemonic discourses not only control how an event is mediatized but also condition and determine the ways in which we look at and react to events on the unconscious level.

Against the post-9/11 resurgence of patriotism, many critics have made concerted efforts to exhume a buried national memory that most jeopardizes American exceptionalist discourse: the Vietnam War. Since the military defeat in Southeast Asia, the memory of Vietnam has remained a highly contested issue in talking about American politics and warfare. For conservatives, Vietnam is a trauma that Americans are suffering from, and it is imperative to forget or revise it in order for Americans to recover from it and move forward (to a new war); for liberals, the war must be remembered as nothing other than American violence inflicted upon people in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, as a war that eloquently revealed that American exceptionalism has always served since the country's establishment as a flagrant means of validating its use of force. As William Spanos argues in *American Exceptionalism in the Age of Globalization*, "the specter of Vietnam" is still haunting the post-9/11 American homeland security state,[2] despite President George W. Bush's endeavor to exorcise it through legislation of the Patriot Act in 2001 and the Homeland Security Act in 2002, among others. If the discourse and the affect surrounding the war on terror have been regulated via American exceptionalist visual legacies, how to look at the post-9/11 American homeland security state through an antiexceptionalist lens emerges as a challenge worth engaging. But what does it mean to "remember" the Vietnam War as a visual countermemory during and after the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, or elsewhere? How would it be possible for what Marianne Hirsch termed the "postmemory generation" to keep remembering the war that formally ended in 1975, to continue witnessing "the specter of Vietnam" still haunting the post-9/11 American homeland? What are the cultural and historical conditions of antiexceptionalist optics when it comes to representing Vietnam in the age of the

war on terror? More broadly, how can we talk about critical ways of visualizing countermemories?

With these questions in mind, I examine Debra Granik's 2018 film *Leave No Trace*,[3] an adaptation of Peter Rock's novel *My Abandonment* (2009), which itself is a novelization of an actual event widely reported in 2004. The film tells the story of a family consisting of an Iraq War veteran named Will (Ben Foster)—the model individual was a Vietnam War vet—and his daughter Tom (Thomasin McKenzie),[4] who are living illegally in a state park in a northeastern American rain forest. By capturing a vet suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) back home following his military service in the Iraqi desert who is now obsessively drawn to the rain forest that permeates the screen, *Leave No Trace*, I argue, visually evokes the Vietnam War as a landscape and situates the war on terror within that historical context. By capturing an Iraq War vet against the background of the green landscape of Vietnam, a country that most Americans associate with "a war fought in the jungle," the film refoliates Vietnam on the post-9/11 American homeland security state, conjuring up the specter of Vietnam to historically recontextualize Bush's normalization of the state of exception. Granik's film also subsumes and subverts the complicity between American exceptionalism and American victimhood by addressing the conflict between Will and Tom, a postmemory daughter. Although the film changed the title of the story, its cinematography foregrounds Tom's agency in the act of abandonment further than does the novel. Toward the end, Tom decides to "abandon" her father, who disappears into the woods, but the daughter continues to attend to the Iraq War vet via the landscape wherein he is believed to be surviving. It is through this indirection, as opposed to direct daily contact with the intensely traumatized subject, that the postmemory daughter manages to maintain a sustainable relationship with the past that she never experienced. The transgenerational trauma, in this case the amalgamation of the father's individual experience in Iraq and the state's violent history in Vietnam, is remembered and inherited through and as the landscape.

Vietnam as Transgenerational Trauma

As Bush and his policymakers consistently called for a "state of emergency" and are remembered for doing so, it would be necessary to map out the relationship among state of emergency, state of exception, and exceptionalism. First, Bush's state of emergency can

be understood as a form of state of exception. Carl Schmitt, whose political theory has empowered worldwide totalitarian regimes since Nazi Germany in his own time, famously defined sovereignty as "he who decides on the exception" and defined exception as "principally unlimited authority, which means the suspension of the entire existing order."[5] The post-9/11 deployment of the state of emergency, which expanded state power to mobilize the military, target terrorist facilities around the world, and selectively surveil, detain, and judge suspected terrorists, falls within the category of the state of exception.[6] It is a time of emergency, the Bush administration's logic goes, so the state must suspend the law and put exceptional policies into action. Giorgio Agamben, in opening his *State of Exception* by juxtaposing Schmitt's *Political Theology* and Bush's Patriot Act, also criticized Bush's homeland security state as a typical instance of the state of exception. Agamben's argument is that the state of exception is no longer an exception and instead has become a "paradigm of government" and "has perhaps only today reached its full development."[7] Bush's constant reference to himself as the "Commander in Chief of the Army" after 9/11, Agamben continues, should be understood as the "presidential claim to sovereign powers in emergency situations," and "Bush is attempting to produce a situation in which the emergency becomes the rule, and the very distinction between peace and war . . . becomes impossible."[8] While the Cold War presidents tended to characterize their wars as small, limited, and experimental—that is, as less than a war—Bush took 9/11 as a chance to reinvigorate American militarism by pushing the limit of "national" state of exception all over the world, thereby waging the war on terror, a full-scale, permanent, and global warfare.

Second, the state of exception and exceptionalism, as Donald Pease argues, are originally incompatible with each other. While American exceptionalism, a belief in American superiority in the world, is assumed to be a "norm" of the United States, its policymakers, in regulating such obviously unjustifiable events as Japanese internment camps, Operation Wetback, and the Vietnam War, among others, have been forced to label those instances as exceptional deviations from that norm, from the linear narrative of the nation's official exceptionalist history. "But if American exceptionalism produced beliefs to which the state has regularly taken exception," Pease writes, "the state has nevertheless needed the fantasy [of exceptionalism] to solicit its citizenry's assent to its monopoly over actual and symbolic violence."[9] Thus, Pease diagnoses the resiliency of the belief in American exceptionalism despite the constant production of exceptions to it as maintained by the "structures

of denial."[10] Yet, the coexistence of American exceptionalism as a norm and the incessant declarations of exception to it no longer seem to constitute any serious contradiction to the Bush administration's ideologues such as Karl Rove, John Ashcroft, and Paul Wolfowitz. Most prominent would be Vice President Dick Cheney, who advised Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, George H. W. Bush, and George W. Bush and in 2015 published *Exceptional: Why the World Needs a Powerful America*. For this architect of the Patriot Act, it is totally consistent to advocate American exceptionalism and to declare that "the Chief Executive will on occasion feel duty bound to assert monarchical notions of prerogative that will permit him to exceed the law."[11] The state of exception has become the "paradigm of government" for this homeland security state indeed, and now the contradiction itself has become a norm; American exceptionalism has absorbed the state of exception as a core component of its own arsenal. Wars in Iraq or Afghanistan no longer have to be forgotten or revised; post-9/11 American exceptionalism can declare the war on terror with pride. The reevocation of Vietnam after 9/11 thus gains critical importance in reperceiving—or revisualizing—the egregious contradictions of American exceptionalism.

In the past two decades, the so-called New Americanists have made the most prominent contributions to remembering Vietnam as countermemory. For American political thinking, how to remember—or forget—Vietnam has constituted a crucial core for both the Right and the Left. For conservatives such as Ronald Reagan, for example, Vietnam meant the American (rather than Vietnamese) wound to be healed, and he diagnosed Americans' unwillingness thereafter to get involved in any military action as the "Vietnam syndrome." In the early 1990s, George H. W. Bush, celebrating the "success" of his Operation Desert Storm in "liberating" Kuwait in the Persian Gulf, declared to have "kicked" the syndrome,[12] retrospectively consolidating Reagan's revisionist account of Vietnam as a "noble cause." For them, Vietnam is an American trauma from which the state must recover through waging and winning more wars. It is as if every time it wages war, the United States has to summon up and exorcise its own traumatic memory, as if, following faithfully Freud's classic definition, in an attempt to "work through" its trauma by compulsively repeating the past.[13] In the twenty-first century, George W. Bush was destined to repeat the process in Afghanistan and Iraq. "As the public watched the war on television," Pease writes, "the transgenerational trauma inherited from Vietnam seemed to have been conjured up to be 'worked through' in the hyper-reality of the Iraqi desert so that it might be completely obliterated from the national psyche."[14] In

examining transgenerational trauma from the perpetrator's perspective, Gabriele Schwab argues that "the buried ghosts of the past come to haunt language from within, always threatening to destroy its communicative and expressive function."[15] The same thing can happen to our optics, especially when trauma is eagerly regulated through visual images. If the transgenerational trauma of Vietnam seemed to be worked through in "the hyper-reality of the Iraqi desert" as shown on TV, we might be able to intervene in the process precisely by compulsively repeating the visual memory of this war fought in the "jungle."

As Amy Kaplan has repeatedly demonstrated, "the notions of the domestic and the foreign mutually constitute one another in an imperial context."[16] The "oxymoronic" nature of American imperialism is what the title of her 2002 acclaimed book designates: *The Anarchy of Empire*. In a later article published as a reaction to the promulgation of the 2002 Homeland Security Act, she applied this observation to George W. Bush "homeland" as a focalizing trope of the resurgence of the post-9/11 American exceptionalism as well as, for her, a fulcrum to subvert it. "Thus," Kaplan writes, "the idea of homeland works by generating a profound sense of insecurity not only because of the threat of terrorism, but because the homeland, too, proves a fundamentally uncanny place, haunted by prior and future losses, invasions, abandonment. The uncanny, after all, in Freud is a translation of unheimlich, the "unhomely." The homeland is haunted by all the unfamiliar yet strangely familiar foreign specters that threaten to turn it into its opposite."[17] Taken together, the New Americanists' critical strategy can be summarized as a practice to render the post-9/11 homeland an uncanny, unhomelike place by evoking "all the unfamiliar yet strangely familiar foreign specters," that is, above all to make "the specter of Vietnam" visible within the homeland security state rather than as an exceptional war fought "over there." As much as the official narrative and mediatization can regulate our unconscious optics, cultural productions can also critically intervene in the process by conjuring up the countermemory that the state authorities believed had been worked through. When looking at the American homeland security state through antiexceptionalist optics, one will find it haunted by the specters of Vietnam.

While evoking Vietnam would serve as a critique of American exceptionalism, the memory of the Vietnam War is exposed to the danger of oblivion for a more practical reason, one similar to what World War II memory encountered in the 1990s. At that time, the survivors of the war that ended in 1945 were getting old and passing away, and those perceiving the crisis of memory began to

archive the testimonies from the firsthand witnesses. Along with this "memory boom," a discipline called memory studies emerged, and scholars, especially those engaged with trauma theory and Holocaust studies, began to discuss what the second or later generations of a traumatic historical event can and should do in face of this unfolding crisis. At this point Hirsch's "postmemory," theorized through her examination of Holocaust survivors' photograph and its influence on family members born after the event, emerged as the most seminal tool in considering such problematics. "Postmemory is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection," she writes.[18] It is a "powerful and very particular form of memory" in that "its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation."[19] Postmemory is not just a relatively inauthentic "memory" in relation to the first generation; it is "very particular form of memory" that is different from memories of direct experiences precisely because of its distance, alienation, or indirectness. In the post-9/11 American context, its postmemory generation, such as children of Iraq War vets, needs to confront the transgenerational memory of Iraq and Vietnam at the same time. Amid the national endeavor to willfully forget and revise those memories quickly, what kind of critical position can those who come after occupy in their engagement with memory "through an imaginative investment and creation"? In this way, the postmemory generation emerges as a unique actor of remembering the memory of Vietnam in the American homeland, and, as I demonstrate, the landscape serves as a vehicle for this critical inheritance.

Refoliating Vietnam in the American Homeland

Leave No Trace is a film pervaded with greenery. It begins with the diegetic sound of a forest—water, insects, birds, and the rustle of leaves—and then we are presented with a close-up of the mossy, ferny branches followed by high-angle long shots capturing the two main characters in turn: first the father Will and then his daughter Tom, whose visibility is constantly blocked by the prominent vegetation. Throughout the story, we often lose sight of actors among trees in extreme long shots. They are living in the woods, which will turn out to be a public rain forest park in Portland, Oregon, by means of survival skills that sustain their idyllic, self-sufficient, and ecological way of life. Indeed, for the film's title Granik opted for the phrase "leave no trace," which indicates ecological outdoor

ethics and practices aimed at preserving and coexisting with nature. When watching Will waking up in the middle of the night from a nightmare reverberating with the loud sound of a helicopter or passing over a *New York Times* clipping about suicidal vets returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, the viewer is gradually informed that Will is suffering from PTSD stemming from his service in Iraq. After the duo is forcibly removed from the park due to a careless mistake on Tom's part and ordered to be relocated in a facility under government supervision, Will soon decides to go back into the woods against Tom's wishes, this time in Washington State. While it is common for a traumatized subject to struggle (and find it impossible) to reenter "normal" civilian life, Will's unflinching resolution to keep hidden in the woods invites interpretation. With her aesthetic choice to dominate the screen with vivid green in a way that novels might not capture, Granik augments the mystery of Will's psychological mechanism. Through its cinematography, the film underscores that this is a story about the relationship between the verdant landscape and an Iraq War vet's trauma.

In the 2004 news report, the actual father was a Vietnam War vet. He abducted his daughter from her foster parents in Idaho under false pretense and raised her secretly in the forest on his own. In novelizing this incident, Rock strangely chose to set it in 1999 so that the father, though not specified, could remain a Vietnam War vet, but the story was displaced from the historical background of the war on terror. Granik put it back into the post-9/11 context but, oddly, decided to characterize him as an Iraq War vet. To understand this move, we need to turn to an interview organized by Tiff Talks in 2018 in which Granik referred to her intention to bridge Vietnam and Iraq when shooting *Leave No Trace*. She began by referring to her recent film *Stray Dog* (2014), a documentary featuring a Vietnam War vet, Ron, that was "very influential in the backstory of Will." Through her contact with Vietnam War vets in the age of the war on terror, she came to realize that "this war was no different."[20] She avoided using the term "post-traumatic stress disorder" because, she believed, this now popularized term coined in the aftermath of the Vietnam War has rendered the war "invisible" by explaining away the "gnarly" nature of the war. Granik, dubbing the wars fought in the Middle East as the "Sand War,"[21] continued, stating that "of course the Sand War veterans and the literature that's been more recent aided and abetted that understanding," that is, American wars as American PTSD. Her choice of recharacterizing a Vietnam War vet as an Iraq War vet signals her cognizance of the transgenerational continuum between Vietnam and Iraq, wars fought in the jungle and in the desert, respectively.

Yet, this is not to say that the wars in Vietnam and Iraq are actually "no different"; in placing an Iraq War vet against the Vietnamese background, this Iraq War film situates the war on terror within the broader historical context of American wars throughout the long Cold War, that is, not as an exception but instead as a structural contradiction embedded in the ideology of American exceptionalism.

When Granik describes her filmmaking engagement with the wars in Vietnam and Iraq as an attempt to make Vietnam visible again in the post-9/11 American homeland, she echoes New Americanist's critical vocabulary. "The invisible/silent (non)*being* of the Vietnamese insurgents vis-à-vis the American army in the Vietnam 'wilderness' in the 1960s," as Spanos writes, "haunts the American cultural memory now, after the Al Qaeda attacks."[22] To be able to see the invisible specter of Vietnam as Spanos argues, drawing on Louis Althusser, we need to develop a "new gaze,"[23] and this is what I call antiexceptionalist optics. With frequent recourse to long and extreme long shots, Granik's film has the green landscape dominate the small figures of the actors; here, the rain forest possesses a competence as what narratologists refer to as *actant*.[24] The landscape, albeit anthropomorphic, has an agency in its own right in this pictorial narrative. In criticizing American cultural, especially cinematic, representations of the Vietnam War, Darda notes that "Americans waged war in Vietnam, it seems, with a brutal environment and themselves, not with Vietnamese,"[25] thereby erasing the existence of Asian victims. Indeed, American cultural and political imaginations have conceptualized Vietnam as a "jungle" with nobody in it (a variation of the exceptionalist myth of "Virgin Land"), and the idea of the enemy as the landscape, an *actant*, was at the core of President John F. Kennedy's mind when he fantasized about being able to defeat the country by defoliating it with the notorious herbicide Agent Orange in contravention of the 1925 Geneva Protocol. It was this cultural imagination and memory of Vietnam as a war fought in the jungle that the United States tried to "work through" in the "hyper-reality" of the Iraqi desert in vain, and it is this failure that the film highlights as the historical reference point of the war on terror, as something that will never be "surmounted." In capturing an Iraq War vet compulsively returning to the rain forest, *Leave No Trace* refoliates Vietnam in the post-9/11 American homeland security state.

It is no wonder, then, that the state authorities evict Will from the park. Soon after Tom is spotted by a jogger, police officers and social workers come to search the woods, and the father-daughter unit, despite their leave-no-trace practices and hide-and-seek drillings, is easily detected by a tracker dog, loudly barking away, that

violently disarranges their chessboard, a familial communication tool. As the frightened and angered Tom protests against the unnecessary deployment of an aggressive German shepherd, the search party is depicted as an intimidating power associated with American military force. The K-9 officer replicates search-and-destroy strategy, a method employed against the guerrilla forces hiding in the jungle during the Vietnam War that is now directed against a traumatized vet and his teenage daughter living in an American rain forest. When taken to an institution, Tom is told by a social worker that "your dad needs to provide you a shelter and a place to live." In Tom's opinion "he did," and they "just don't understand that it was my home." The staff adds, "It's not a crime to be unhoused. Many people are. But it's illegal to live on public land." The protocol of the homeland security state monopolizes the authority over the definition of "home" and polices, criminalizes, and pathologizes every alleged unhomelike element. When the social worker hands over some paperwork to be filled out for Tom's enrollment in a school, not so much asking as ordering—"It's important for you to follow through so you guys can remain *independent*. Do you understand?"—she is talking through the vocabulary of American neocolonialism, a still rampant legacy of Cold War politics, that intervenes into other people's life and culture to recast them as conforming to an American way of life, the only form of independence that one is allowed to enjoy. Thus, the film captures the transnational and transgenerational continuity of American violence against Vietnamese abroad and Iraq War vets and their families at home.

The state surveillance authority that regulates the family's housing, food, and clothing is a salient example of what is now called biopower. In his lecture at the Collège de France, Michel Foucault defined this as the power "to rationalize the problems posed to governmental practice by phenomena characteristic of a set of living beings forming a population: health, hygiene, birthrate, life expectance, race."[26] At the government facility, Will and Tom are prohibited from seeing each other—officials wrongly suspect that Will might have been sexually abusing Tom—and made to undergo a variety of tests, written and oral, that are presented alternatively through cutbacks (figures 1 and 2). When Tom asks how they read her answers and why they don't just ask her directly, the social worker explains that the exam is important because Tom, perhaps traumatized by her father, "might not be able to say it." Will, in front of a computer, is directed to answer 435 true and false questions, such as "I enjoy reading articles on crime," "I have nightmares or troubling dreams," and "I think about things that are too

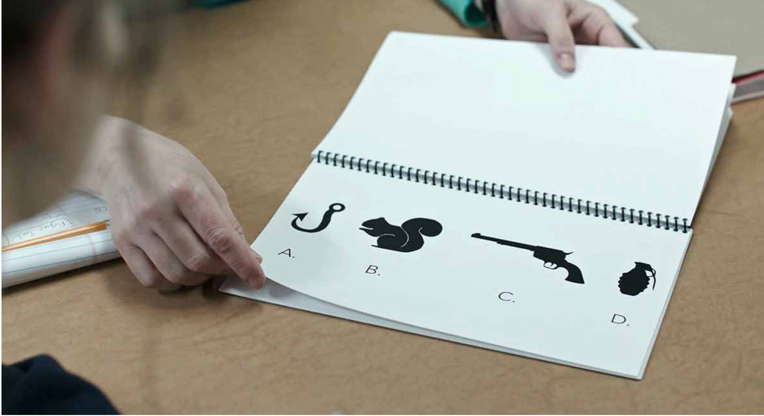

Figure 1. Tom getting tested at the government facility. *Leave No Trace* (Debra Granik, 2018).

Figure 2. Will getting tested at the government facility. *Leave No Trace* (Debra Granik, 2018).

bad to think about," which soon begin to torment him. Though well intentioned on the surface and perhaps from the heart, those in charge of taking care of the family are effective and subservient instruments of the homeland security state. As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri opined, Foucault's work described a "historical, epochal passage in social forms from *disciplinary society* to the *society of control.*"[27] In the latter form of biopolitical society wherein we still abide, "mechanisms of command become ever more 'democratic,' ever more immanent to the social field, distributed throughout the brains and bodies of the citizens."[28] Biopower operates through

such instruments as welfare systems and monitored activities, thereby creating “a state of autonomous alienation from the sense of life.” With its computing and controlling devices that looks unharmful and “democratic,” biopower attempts to domesticate all unhomelike “brains and bodies.”

Equally important, biopower dovetails with the logic of capitalism by interpreting and integrating deviant elements such as pathology into the profit-and-loss calculation system. As Foucault states,

> However pathological the subject may be . . . , he is nevertheless “responsive” to some extent to possible gains and losses, which means that penal action must act on the interplay of gains and losses or, in other words, on the environment; we must act on the market milieu in which the individual makes his supply of crime and encounters a positive or negative demand. This raises the problem . . . of the new techniques of environmental technology or environmental psychology which I think are linked to neo-liberalism in the United States.[29]

In the neoliberal world, everything is included and brought under control rather than excluded and executed so that it contributes to the gains of market. Especially after Francis Fukuyama declared the “end of history” in 1989, proposing that American liberal democracy is the final form of world governance, neoliberalists have argued that the logic of capitalism and free markets is the only possible human “environment.”[30] US-led global capitalism has become a new “nature,” so to speak, and it is only under the neoliberalist regulations that one is allowed to live. After Will and Tom are displaced from the park and relocated to an “independent” house under constant surveillance, Will is asked to work as a farmer. This is a farm that deals in fir Christmas trees for which Oregon is known, where the cacophony of trees being cut with chainsaws, bound by a huge machine, and dropped from a helicopter (which seems to assail the camera) is rendered disturbingly and discordantly loud in juxtaposition with the overall quietness of the film. Whereas the rain forest offers a sense of security for Will, the function of artificial greenness at the farm has a diametrically opposite effect: it torments him (figure 3). When Will asks the farm owner Walters if there would be any work in the stable (a quiet place where he has to see nobody), Walters replies, “Those are expensive animals and take some training. Right now I need help with the trees. That’s where I make my money.” Here, greenness is completely commodified, reified, and deprived of its critical

Figure 3. The loud noise of cutting trees torments Will at the farm in Oregon. *Leave No Trace* (2018).

potentiality to unnaturalize the neoliberal "nature"; it represents the environment called global capitalism.

life in the rain forest looks natural and self-sufficient, they in fact cannot help depending on consumer society out of the woods for daily necessities. After all, the "natural" rain forest is a public park owned and operated by the neoliberal state. Before buying food at a grocery store, Will takes Tom to a Veterans Administration (VA) hospital, where the camera does not fail to capture a disabled old vet in a wheelchair across whose back we can read the term "VIETNAM." Will sells the prescribed medicines he receives to other vets who seem to be living on the fringe of the same park on their own. Reading aloud the warnings deridingly ("If you are a veteran who takes benzos for PTSD, here is what you need to know"), the vet asks Will "when was the last time that stopped a nightmare?" They both know that these painkillers and tranquilizes are in fact "pretty much useless." "I haven't taken them in two years, seven months and twenty-eight days," the vet adds, handing Will some money. Here PTSD, ironically quoted from an official document, is no more than a simplified narrative that will never seriously attend to how veterans are suffering, as Granik criticized in the interview. Moreover, the VA network is also integrated into the network of state apparatus: "At first," the vet observes, "they're handing 'em out like candy, then they pull the leash on us." Indeed, Foucault characterized medical science, the discursive power consisting of "making live and letting die," as the central instrument in establishing biopower "with institutions to coordinate medical

care, centralize information, and normalize knowledge."[31] Though Will's illegal activity seems to assume a critical aspect against the medico-political hegemonic power, he cannot avoid participating in and contributing to the logic of global capitalism sustained by biopower/biopolitics. In this neoliberal environment where there is no way out, Will has no option other than capitalizing on his pathological mind and body; here, one can always find a way to make it marketable.

Yet, an uncritical emphasis on Will's status as a victim would run the risk of rendering him as a vehicle to validate American exceptionalism. In the wake of 9/11, American cultural studies scholars such as Ann Kaplan, Marita Sturken, Jeffrey Alexander, and many others have critiqued the complicity of the resurgence of American militarism and the cultural politics of trauma discourse that foregrounds the victimhood and innocence of Americans in an ahistorical manner. A fragrant example of American victim culture and the tradition of deploying veterans in its making would be the revisionist account of the Vietnam War during the 1980s under the Reagan administration, with the building of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the "heal the wound" narrative. "The memorial culture of the United States," Sturken writes, "has been largely experienced as a therapeutic culture, in which particular citizens, primarily veterans and their families, have been seen as coming to terms with the past and making peace with difficult memories."[32] After 9/11, the symbolized site designated ground zero also "has produced particular narratives of redemption that participate in the production on innocence," being "deployed as the justification for a series of wars and destructive policies on the U.S. government."[33] Though Will is at odds with the authorities of the homeland security state, he is an American ex-combatant who served in Iraq; after all, he is an agent of American violence. Yet, Granik's film is mindful of this risk in portraying a veteran's victimhood in the post-9/11 context, which is expressed through the conflict between Will and Tom, the father's unwitting victimization of his daughter, and the daughter's decision to "abandon" her father. The film narratively and cinematographically encourages the viewer to relativize Will's drama from Tom's perspective. Through critically relativizing Will's victimhood from a postmemory generation's viewpoint, *Leave No Trace* visually preserves rather than cures transgenerational trauma as a nonconforming element of the American homeland.

Antiexceptionalist Optics

In their familial relationship without a mother, thirteen-year-old Tom is obliged to take on the mother-wife role. In the scene in which Will wakes up from a nightmare punctuated by the sound of a helicopter, Tom, dealing with this recurrent nighttime situation, tries to soothe him by asking what his favorite color is. Will replies by echoing the same question, to which Tom answers "yellow" and extends the conversation by further asking what color her mother liked best. It too was yellow, according to Will, to which Tom mutters, "Maybe she told me that. I wish I could remember her" (later, it is hinted that Will had to get divorced because he "got hooked on pain medication"). This exchange early in the film encapsulates the multiplicity of Tom's roles and predicaments. As the only companion of a troubled vet, she needs to work as a caretaker who looks after him around the clock; when attending to a frightened Will, Tom looks like a mother pacifying a distraught child. Tom and her mother sharing a favorite color implies that the daughter serves for Will as a kind of stand-in for his wife. While her high scores on intelligence tests testifies to the effectiveness of Will's homeschooling education, it also signals that as a motherless daughter living with a traumatized father, Tom had to develop maturity and independence quickly for her age. Although she does her best to support him, the stress she suffers from is gradually foregrounded as the narrative evolves, eventually culminating in her "abandonment" of Will. Not only does the film relativize Will's victimhood through this process, but it also sublimates the theme of abandonment as a further critique of American exceptionalism. Tom's final decision to "abandon" her father visually suggests a way of inheriting the transgenerational trauma through and as the landscape into which Will disappears.

The roles that Tom performs are not restricted to familial ones. Due to Will's traumatic reenactments stemming from his war experience, she is indirectly involved in the Iraq War as a fellow "soldier." When Will catches the sound of chainsaws in the rain forest from afar, he suddenly becomes aroused and hyperalert, while Tom, knowing what will happen next, tries to assure him of their safety. "Drill," Will commands, interrupting dinner and initiating their routine hide-and-seek exercise in which Tom is supposed to hide in the woods within ten seconds but is detected too easily: "You're burned. Your tracks are all over the place." "Dad, I can do this," Tom says. "Well, then, do it well," Will replies. "Hey. Do it well. One more time." In explicating the mechanism of reenactment that is common to traumatized subjects, trauma theorist

Judith Herman notes that they "relive the moment of trauma not only in their thoughts and dreams but also in their actions," and "some reenactments are consciously chosen."[34] Herman also notes that "sometimes people reenact the traumatic moment with a fantasy of changing the outcome of the dangerous encounter. In their attempts to undo the traumatic moment, survivors may even put themselves at risk of further harm." In this pseudo-military drill, Will is obsessed with saving his comrade's life by training him/her to hide well. Given the fact that Granik decided to use the actress's real nickname, Tom, which is usually a boy's name, instead of Caroline in the original novel, we can assume the director's implication to be that Will is reenacting a past experience in which he was unable to save "Tom" in Iraq. Will is obsessed with "a fantasy of changing the outcome," and its "risk of further harm" is in this case inflicted on his daughter. Tom represents what Schwab calls "replacement children" who "will commonly be unable to develop a sense of coming into his or her own place" under the burden of "parental fantasy" to replace the dead one with the living one.[35] Trapped in the traumatized father's fantasy, Tom is prevented from being fully herself.

In short, the traumatic nature of Will's battlefield experience impels him to prioritize himself at the sacrifice of Tom. He is incapacitated as a father to care adequately for his child, and as the film repeatedly emphasizes, he is unable to avoid victimizing her as long as they live together. During the drill Tom repeatedly tells Will that she is hungry, but he pays no attention to her and orders one more round. While waiting for Will to be prescribed drugs at the VA hospital, Tom, after greeting a Vietnam War vet in a wheelchair, talks with another old vet (who is old enough to have served in Vietnam too). He is a staff member working at the hospital's counter to distribute VA-issued devices, such as a "stress coin" to call for help when one has "a friend or family member in trouble that's a vet" and a gun lock that "keeps them from accidentally shooting someone and . . . it gives them time to think before they commit something wrong, even worse." Thus, Tom is cognizant of the danger of Will's violence toward either himself or her. Later when Will decides to run away from the farm against Tom's wishes, her palm is cut when they are catching an illegal ride on a train—she is constantly involved in committing crimes—and Will, ignoring her complaints, simply remarks, "Not too deep, clean it out." Subsequently, in the mountains of Washington State she becomes too tired and cold to walk on, but Will, a trained soldier, insists that "we've gotta move quickly." At an abandoned cabin that they find and break into, Tom, while Will is away, happens to take a look into

her father's Ziplock bag containing documents in which she finds the clipping from the *New York Times* titled "A Unit Stalked by Suicide, Trying to Save Itself,"[36] a headline that stuns Tom and exacerbates her anxiety about her father's potential impulsive suicide, thereby leaving her alone (that night he fails to come back due to an accident that nearly kills him). Tom sincerely wants to take care of Will and even seems to be willing if necessary to take on his transgenerational trauma, but this is simply beyond her capacity. How, then, can she "abandon" her father in a way that does not involve the forgetting of violent history? What, in other words, is an ethical abandonment for the postmemory generation? This is the question that *Leave No Trace* ultimately has to address through Tom.

The conflict between Will and Tom that results in their separation best manifests as Tom's desire to belong to a community versus Will's compulsion to return to the forest and hide away. After being taken away from the farm around which she has just begun building some new social connections, Tom complains to Will, "I liked it there. Did you even try?" The same thing happens while they are allowed to use a vacant RV in a forested RV park until Will's broken ankle fully heals. Before long, Tom finds Will packing his belongings to leave, and they have the following exchange:

> *Tom*: What are you doing? Dad, your—your leg isn't even healed all the way. And it won't. It won't heal alright. I don't want to leave. Last time you almost died. And you would have if I hadn't found you.
>
> *Will*: That will never happen again.
>
> *Tom*: These people, they're not that different from us.
>
> *Will*: Yes, they've been very good to us, but *we* have to . . .
>
> *Tom*: You! You need. Not me. The same thing that's wrong with you isn't wrong with me.

Though she then gives way to Will's determination to leave, the disintegration of "we" here already signals the decision she has made for herself; in the woods she stops following him, resolute to stay behind, and thereby "abandons" him. In the context of the post-9/11 resurgence of American exceptionalism and its cultural representations, Tom's choice of staying with a nonfamilial community and "abandoning" her traumatized father is of particular significance. Many American post-9/11 films and novels have garnered popularity by capitalizing on the sentimental trajectory from trauma to recovery achieved by means of family reunion.[37] In criticizing this vogue in storytelling, Richard Gray argues that "most of the fiction . . . betrays a response to crisis that is eerily analogous to the reaction of many politicians and the mainstream American

media after 9/11: a desperate retreat into the old sureties."[38] Even works that are ostensibly self-critical regarding their potential complicity with patriotism, he continues, are "not entirely resistant to the seductive pieties of home, hearth and family and, related to them, the equally seductive myth of American exceptionalism."[39] In post-9/11 American fictions, American exceptionalism, trauma culture, and the theme of family converge. If "nonverbal and precognitive acts of transfer occur most clearly within a familial space," as Hirsch notes,[40] and if "the danger of emphasizing memory and mourning lies in using trauma as the foundation of identity," as Schwab warns,[41] then the transgenerational transmission and healing of traumatic memory within the family can be deployed as a typically conservative plot. These ideological maneuvers are subsumed and subverted in *Leave No Trace* in its closing sequences.

Tom decides to stay with the RV community, Granik's original idea, conceived in the wake of her acquaintance with Vietnam vets while shooting *Stray Dog*. At one point, Tom watches and helps Dale (Dale Dickey)—a local woman who initially accommodates them and, perceiving their situation, sends for a veteran medic for the injured Will—unload and transfer food supplies from a truck into a seemingly waterproof pouch. Dale explains, "I leave this out for someone who lives up in the woods. Haven't seen them in years, but I know he gets the foods 'cause when I come back, the bag is always empty." In the woods, Dale hangs the bag onto a branch, patting the tree's trunk as if communicating with it or, rather, with the whole environment within which those unknown men—perhaps also vets, judging from the community's display of unqualified sympathy toward Will—are believed to be still surviving. This indirect way of caring for somebody invisible profoundly impresses Tom and shows her a way to separate from Will while not entirely abandoning him. In the final sequence that follows the "abandonment," Will, now alone, deviates from a gravel road and appears to "melt" into the woods, at which point the camera tilts up and he becomes completely indiscernible (figure 4), which is followed by Tom replicating Dale's practice (figure 5). In analyzing the contemporary mediatization and mediation of catastrophic images after 9/11, Ann Kaplan argues that those indirect forms of witnessing can result in either secondary trauma or what she terms "empty empathy," a fleeting, ahistorical kind of emotional response.[42] The ending of Granik's film shows a way to eschew this dilemma: for the postmemory generation, it is suggested, the mediation of trauma via landscape works as a means to sustain one's connection to a transgenerational trauma. Neither a direct daily contact with (which victimizes Tom) nor a complete abandonment

Figure 4. Will "melts" into the woods. *Leave No Trace* (2018).

Figure 5. Tom "feeds" the landscape wherein her father is believed to be surviving. *Leave No Trace* (2018).

of (which forgets Will) a traumatized subject, Tom demonstrates an indirect, sustainable kind of relationship with her father's memory via the environment.

Though their ecological After Will has merged into the woods, he becomes a constituent of the green landscape that has defined the dominant atmosphere of the entire film. Will as an individual character is now decomposed, and the trace of his existence—along with those of other "invisible" vets—is spread over the screen. He becomes a landscape; with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guttari, this conversion might be termed a becoming-landscape.[43] The characteristic and memorable greenness of this film here

becomes historically overdetermined: for Tom, the forest represents an interface connected to the trauma of her Iraq vet father, while for the viewer, Tom's practice is presented against the background of the Vietnam War as landscape. Through separation and disappearance, we see Will leaving traces of the Iraq War on and as an affectively and historically charged—haunted—landscape, environment, or medium. Neither the rain forest (Vietnam) nor the vet (Iraq) is "worked through" but survive as an entity to be attended to; the final sequence urges us to recognize that the older war, characterized as "exceptional" to American history, and the recent one, waged under the declaration of "state of exception," prove far from exceptional when taken together. This film brings Iraq and Vietnam to intersect and renders visible the contradictions of American exceptionalism. The seemingly sentimental narrative of a wounded family and its separation in fact represents a visual way of registering the Iraq War along the genealogy of the Vietnam War. Following separation, the camera captures Will disappearing into and then Tom "feeding" the landscape, scenes that are bridged by a slow tilt-up shot of a spiderweb—a repetition of a sequence at the outset of the film, though we see three whole webs in the first (figure 6) and just one in the last in a close-up with its edges out of the frame (figure 7). Whereas at the beginning it might signify the "ideal" nuclear family with a mother in it and Tom's status as being caught in the web, the final image crystalizes the temporary abode for Will, Tom's independence, and the networked community that connects her and the now invisible father out of the screen. Despite its title, *Leave No Trace* is a film that is all about leaving historical traces.

In interviews, Granik refers to the thirteen-year-old girl as "an outsider"[44] to the combatant experience and intended to convey that the father "wants to pass his legacies to his daughter."[45] If the film presents the way to pass on the legacy of the Iraq War as inseparable from the Vietnam War to "outsiders" through landscape, it would also implicate its spectators, most of whom are more alienated than Tom from the direct memory of the wars, whether Vietnam or Iraq. How can the postmemory generation, as outsiders or just as casual spectators of a film, respond to the insider's appeal in an ethical manner? What is it about outsider's responsibility or the ethical condition of outsider's ability to respond that might be termed as "response-ability"? Granik, another outsider, expresses her filmmaker ethics through her cinematography. While the original novel employs the girl's first-person narration, Granik carefully refrains from using point-of-view shots, even close-ups of faces, eschewing emotional overidentification with "insiders" in

Figures 6. There are three whole spiderwebs at the beginning of the film. *Leave No Trace* (2018).

Figures 7. At the end of the film, there is just one spiderweb. *Leave No Trace* (2018).

relation to herself and signaling her aesthetic and ethical choice to maintain distance between disparate subject positions. In theorizing indirect witnesses' ethicality, Thomas Trezise, in his aptly titled *Witnessing Witnessing*, argues that "however it may be motivated, the overidentification with survivors or the appropriation of their experience as our own can prove just as silencing."[46] Granik's film not only assigns this outsider's response-ability upon herself but also demands it from its spectators. For viewers, this distance prevents us from overempathizing with victims and "war heroes," a critical distance that betrays our expectation to view those images

through exceptionalist optics. In situating the "exceptional" war on terror within the context of another "exceptional" war fought in Southeast Asia, Debra Granik's *Leave No Trace* calls on us to develop an antiexceptionalist optics through which to look at not only the film itself but also actual, ongoing, and "exceptional" American violence committed off the screen.

Notes

1. Joseph Darda, "The Exceptionalist Optics of 9/11 Photography," *Journal of American Studies* 50, no. 1 (2017): 185–204.

2. William V. Spanos, *American Exceptionalism in the Age of Globalization: The Specter of Vietnam* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 51.

3. *Leave No Trace*, dir. Debra Granik (Harrison Productions, Reisman Productions, and Still Rolling Productions, 2018).

4. See Peter Rock, *My Abandonment* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2010).

5. Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 5, 12.

6. For a more detailed theoretical distinction between exception and emergency, see George Schwab, *The Challenge of the Exception: An Introduction to the Political Ideas of Carl Schmitt between 1921 and 1936*, 2nd ed. (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1989).

7. Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 13, 22.

8. Agamben, *State of Exception*, 22.

9. Donald E. Pease, "Exceptionalism," in *Keywords for American Cultural Studies* (New York: New York University Press, 2007/2020), keywords.nyupress.org/american-cultural-studies/essay/exceptionalism/.

10. Pease, "Exceptionalism."

11. Quoted in Peter Dale Scott, "Is the State of Emergency Superseding the US Constitution? Continuity of Government Planning, War and American Society," *Japan Focus: The Asia-Pacific Journal* 8, issue 48, no. 1 (2010), apjjf.org/-Peter-Dale-Scott/3448/article.html.

12. George Bush, "Remarks to the American Legislative Exchange Council," American Presidency Project, March 1, 1991, www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=19351.

13. See Sigmund Freud, "Remembering, Repeating and Working Through," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 12, trans. James Strachey, 145–57 (London: Hogarth, 1958).

14. Donald E. Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 55.

15. Gabriele Schwab, *Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 49.

16. Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 4.

17. Amy Kaplan, “Homeland Insecurities: Some Reflections on Language and Space,” *Radical History Review* 85 (Winter 2003): 89.

18. Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 22.

19. Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 22.

20. “Debra Granik on *Leave No Trace* | TIFF 2018,” YouTube, July 1, 2021, www.youtube.com/watch?v=qXICB9Vmfrk.

21. The “Sand War” is a misleading byname, since this designation is also used for the conflict between Algeria and Morocco in 1963.

22. Spanos, *American Exceptionalism*, 56.

23. Spanos, 52.

24. See Algirdas Julien Greimas, “Actants, Actors, and Figures,” in *On Meaning: Selected Writing in Semiotic Theory*, trans. Paul J. Perron and Frank H. Collins, 106–20 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

25. Joseph Darda, *Empire of Defense: Race and the Cultural Politics of Permanent War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 81.

26. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–79*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 317.

27. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 22–23.

28. Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 23.

29. Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 259.

30. For critiques of the “end of history” discourse, see Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 2014); Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism; or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991); and Slavoj Žižek, “Class Struggle or Postmodernism? Yes Please!,” in Judith Butler, Ernest Laclau and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, 90–135 (London: Verso, 2000).

31. Michel Foucault, *“Society Must Be Defended”: Lectures at the Collège de France 1975–1976*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 244–47.

32. Marita Sturken, *Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch, and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 14.

33. Sturken, *Tourists of History*, 169.

34. Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 39.

35. Schwab, *Haunting Legacies*, 122.

36. Dave Philipps, “In Unit Stalked by Suicide, Veterans Try to Save One Another,” *New York Times*, September 19, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/20/us/marine-battalion-veterans-scarred-by-suicides-turn-to-one-another-for-help.

37. Whether conservative, liberal, or radical, many American filmmakers and novelists are not only depicting 9/11 and Iraq but also eagerly revisiting American wars fought throughout Asia during the Cold War era, invariably thematizing familial reunion (or the impossibility or difficulty thereof). To pick just a few acclaimed examples, see Johnathan Safran Foer's 9/11 novel *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005, cinematized in 2011 by the director Stephen Daldry); Toni Morrison's Korean War novel *Home* (2012); Clint Eastwood's Iraq War film *American Sniper* (2014); Phil Klay's Iraq War short story collection *Redeployment* (2014); Paul Schrader's film *First Reformed* (2017); and Spike Lee's Vietnam War film *Da 5 Bloods* (2020).

38. Richard Gray, *After the Fall: American Literature since 9/11* (Chichester, West Sussex, UK:: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 16.

39. Gray, *After the Fall*, 17.

40. Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 34.

41. Schwab, *Haunting Legacies*, 19.

42. E. Ann Kaplan, "Global Trauma and Public Feelings: Viewing Images of Catastrophe," *Consumption, Markets and Culture* 11, no. 1 (2008): 3–24.

43. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 232–309.

44. "Debra Granik Interview on *Leave No Trace* at Sundance London 2018," YouTube, July 1, 2021, https://www.youtube.comwatch?v=eFCZpYnMPWw.

45. "Debra Granik Talks about Her Film *Leave No Trace*," YouTube, July 1, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y0AnZMqcDuU.

46. Thomas Trezise, *Witnessing Witnessing: On the Reception of Holocaust Survivor Testimony* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 224.