

Two Readings of Two Books by Viet Thanh Nguyen

*In this issue, Hai-Dang Phan and Hao Phan review Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* which won the Pulitzer Prize in 2016, and his *Nothing Ever Dies* which was a finalist for the National Book Award in the same year. In 2017, Viet Thanh Nguyen published *The Refugees*, but too late to be considered in these reviews.*

Viet Thanh Nguyen's achievement in *The Sympathizer* is to synthesize, rapidly and relentlessly, a vast cache of historical, literary, and cultural material on the subject of the Vietnam War. An academic turned novelist, Nguyen has written a political novel of ideas, told through the voice of a revolutionary turned intellectual looking back on his faulty education with a heady mix of rage, confusion, and sympathy. It is tempting to rename the novel "The Synthesizer" for bringing together various and often competing intellectual and literary traditions (including the Vietnam War novel, the protest novel, and the ethnic American bildungsroman), reconciling them in and through the intellectual at the center of the novel, the unnamed narrator-spy. Writing a smart and brisk espionage novel retrofitted to the subject of the Vietnam War, Nguyen launches an ambitious assault against Vietnam War representation in American literature and popular culture

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while returning forcefully to his intellectual preoccupations as a scholar of Asian American literature and culture. With its ideas and intellectual project being compelling, interesting, and necessary to me, I thought I would be a more sympathetic reader of this novel.

When we meet the narrator of *The Sympathizer*, he is actually imprisoned in a Communist reeducation camp—undergoing a year-long ideological detox from his long exposure to counterrevolutionary ideas—and sentenced to write a confession that balloons into novel proportions. The novel is told in episodic chapters that alternate between the narrator’s present punishment and his past crimes, the confession itself narrated in extended flashbacks that recount the education of the narrator: Vietnam during the chaotic last days of Sài Gòn, when the narrator is tasked with managing the general’s list of evacuees; Los Angeles in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when the narrator builds a new life with other Vietnamese refugees and continues to report back to his Communist superiors; the Philippines to work on the set of a movie about the war; back to southern California; and finally back to Vietnam on an unlikely and misbegotten mission that lands him in a reeducation camp. “I am a spy, a sleeper, a spook, a man of two faces,” the narrator announces in the novel’s opening salvo, “Perhaps not surprisingly, I am also a man of two minds” (1). He is a bright shining star, with a gift for the dialectic. Rhetoric and ideas flow easily from his mouth. Language functions as his best cover, it is his cloak and his dagger. As a subversive, his greatest weapon is his intelligence, and analytic language is his primary mode of synthesis and subversion. “If an American closed his eyes to hear me speak, he would think I was one of his kind” (7). Half-French, half-Vietnamese, he is an army captain who arranged to come to America after the fall of Sài Gòn, and while building a new life with other Vietnamese refugees in Los Angeles is secretly reporting back to his communist superiors in Vietnam. Above all else, he is a good student, “able to see any issue from both sides” (1).

As a reader I learned little from *The Sympathizer* about post-war Communist reeducation camps in Vietnam despite the novel’s frame narrative and setting. The narration keeps tightly focused on the interrogation scenes and the narrator’s act of writing his confession inside his cell, unfortunately at the cost of thicker descriptions and illuminating details on, for instance,

the administration, organization, and conditions of bare life in the camps. The novel we have ultimately seems less interested in representing reeducation camps as a specific historical instrument of post-war Communist excess than as an allegorical and symbolic space to dramatize the narrator's crisis of commitment.

Insofar as the narrator's education turns him into an artist intellectual, *The Sympathizer* is also a *Künstlerroman* about the narrator's growth, and his education and reeducation are the true subject of the novel. "One must be grateful for one's education no matter how it arrives" (141) the narrator reflects. The reeducation narrative functions primarily as a vehicle for the narrator's personal reflections on his development. Instead of purifying the narrator of his counterrevolutionary ideas, the reeducation camp turns the narrator into an accidental novelist. He receives a cell of his own, a yearlong residency in isolation, "privileged by having no burdens except to write and to reflect" (310). The confession he writes, the novel we read, becomes the new structuring operation for understanding and explaining himself to himself—"the reunification of me with myself" (372). Commanded to copy his 307-page confession, the narrator becomes a reader of his own memoirs: "I developed a growing sympathy for the man in these pages, the intelligence operative of doubtful intelligence" (372). The sprawling and compulsive narrative production of the confession takes on a new urgency when he no longer can look to a revolutionary master plot that organizes and explains the postwar world.

The (re)education plot, we might say, is to change one's character in terms of ways of thinking, feeling, in short, one's intellectual, emotional, and moral sympathies. Cultural training, the novel reminds us, comes in many forms and occurs on many fronts. Before the Vietnamese Communist reeducation camp, for our narrator there was the American small liberal arts college. Describing his six formative years as undergrad, the narrator says: "I was already undercover, part scholarship student, party spy-in training, the lone representative of our people at a sylvan little college called Occidental" (12). Given his mission "to learn American ways of thinking," the American college experience offers him the best possible training, a kind of cultural and linguistic immersion program, a study abroad program for spies. "My war was psychological," the narrator notes, "To that end, I read American

history and literature, perfected my grammar and absorbed the slang, smoked pot and lost my virginity” (12). The narrator’s higher and higher education is what ultimately subverts him, turning him into something other than the revolutionary he was at the beginning.

The narrator’s interlocutors are a cast of different instructive types, representative of special interests, political beliefs and ideologies. Nguyen uses the same device throughout: the narrator encounters another person, their viewpoints either clarifying or conflicting with his own, and on more than one occasion leading him to subvert them in order to not betray himself. This pattern of storytelling becomes a vehicle for the novel’s own instructional program: to critique and correct false representations of the Vietnam War. The commandant, the “you” directly addressed throughout the written confession, is a generic high-ranking North Vietnamese officer charged with supervising the narrator’s reeducation; doing double duty as jailer and editor, he serves the rhetorical role of providing the narrator with an immediate audience, a meta-fictional proxy for the reader. On the other side of the ideological and political divide stands the general, a composite of a high-ranking ARVN official, perhaps not explicitly a head of state like Nguyễn Văn Thiệu or Nguyễn Cao Kỳ. The general is heavily injected with dominant war-era stereotypes of the ARVN leadership as feckless, mercurial, and ineffective. A number of minor characters are instrumentally cast as types: the congressman, a Vietnam vet and staunch anti-Communist, helps payroll the secret mission in exchange for votes from the Vietnamese exile community; the auteur, a thinly-masked parody of Francis Ford Coppola, is a famed filmmaker working on a blockbuster Vietnam War movie who enlists the narrator as a “consultant who can get things right when it comes to Vietnamese matters” (139). With their definite articles, they read like allegorical figures. Claude, the narrator’s CIA counterpart, is cut from the same ideological cloth as Pyle in Graham Greene’s *The Quiet American*; Avery Wright Hammer is “the professor who had guided my American studies and who had agreed to venture out of his field to supervise my senior thesis, “Myth and Symbol in the Literature of Graham Greene” (58); then there are Sonny and Lana, to whom I will return later, perhaps the most sympathetic and well-drawn of the novel’s minor characters; like our narrator, they too distinguish themselves as liminal figures endowed with

skeptical intelligence and cultural fluency, part of a nascent Vietnamese American community in southern California. While often funny enough, these critiques take aim at easy targets. Dialogue in the novel functions as a delivery system for opposing viewpoints, political beliefs, and ideological causes belonging to the differing character types, their talking points delivered on cue.

Representation is a favorite topic of conversation amongst the narrator and his sparring partners. Nguyen hammers at this theme throughout the book, highlighting, for example, how the auteur's "arrogance marked something new in the world, for this was the first war where the losers would write history instead of the victors, courtesy of the most efficient propaganda machine ever created (134)." We can track the narrator's progress, as it were, through his developing thoughts on and around the problem of representation. The Hollywood filmmaker serves as a foil for framing representation as the final battle, the contest over who gets to write history. When the narrator follows the auteur to the Philippines he can't help "brooding over the problem of representation." And what is the general's opinion on the politics of representation? The general expresses it this way: "They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented.' Isn't that wasn't happening here? Marx refers to peasants but he may as well refer to us. We cannot represent ourselves. Hollywood represents us. So we must do what we can to ensure that we are represented well" (144). Making his notes on these impromptu lectures, the narrator eventually arrives at his own working thesis: "They owned the means of production, and therefore the means of representation, and the best that we could ever hope for was to get a word in edgewise before our anonymous deaths" (197). This incremental, accommodating, and compromising position changes through the course of the novel. The narrator eventually rejects this view as he attempts to represent himself in and through his confession. Yet, the question of authority and ownership still plagues him: "Not to own the means of production can lead to premature death, but not to own the means of representation is also a kind of death. For if we are represented by others, might they not, one day, hose our deaths off memory's laminated floor? Still smarting from my wounds even now, I cannot help but wonder, writing this confession, whether I own my representation or whether you, my confessor, do" (194). By the end of the novel, the narrator is still

brooding. “We have nothing to leave to anyone except these words, our best attempt to represent ourselves against all those who sought to represent us” (380).

Reflective of his intellectual training, the narrator uses theory-inflected language throughout his confession. As analysis, his comments don’t take us very far beyond familiar critical approaches: he does not dissect his own representational strategy, or why he too chooses to represent human suffering and sexual violence in ways that might be read as reminiscent of the very Hollywood film he skewers. This partly has to do with the content the narrator has been suppressing—or forgetting—from his written confession: the part about the Communist agent. Something terrible happened that he still can’t talk about—he can only allude to an event that continues to haunt him. Early in the novel, the narrator obliquely refers to an event concerning another Communist agent, captured and interrogated, never telling the reader what exactly occurs or why he is so haunted by it until late in the novel when he discloses his failure to act, on her behalf, despite his expressed fellow feeling. In covering up this violent and compromising episode from his story, then suspending it over the narrative, the novel undergoes its own crisis of representation.

The narrator’s other greatest tests arrive in the form of Sonny and Lana, two younger Vietnamese refugees living in Los Angeles. Perhaps not surprisingly, like our narrator, they are also good students, capable of seeing things from two sides. As the narrator describes him, “[Sonny] was likewise a scholarship student at a college in Orange County” (92). Moreover, he is a “naked leftist” who “led the antiwar faction of Vietnamese foreign students” (93). It is not hard to see how Sonny threatens the narrator’s identity. An independent-minded journalist in search of the truth, Sonny represents a forward-facing younger generation of Vietnamese Americans. The narrator accidentally puts into motion yet another subversion plot: he provokes Sonny into publishing an article unsympathetic to the exile’s cause – “Move On, War Over.” Sonny becomes a marked man, branded by the general as a Communist sympathizer, and more dangerously, a Communist sleeper agent, that is, the narrator’s own secret identity. Having undermined the narrator, Sonny comes close to unmasking the narrator’s true identity as well. As first, these assassinations are necessary to keep the narrator’s cover,

and to keep the plot alive. When he kills Sonny, however, it reads like a function not just of his political commitment, but his by now full-blown paranoia and egoism. The general's daughter Lan, better known by her American name Lana, also threatens the narrator's expressed mission. Like Sonny, Lana is culturally hybrid, fluent in American and Vietnamese culture and language. Her powers of self-fashioning are everywhere on display, whether it is at a Vietnamese wedding, where she performs nostalgia songs and plays the object of desire, or comfortably back in her dorm room as an intellectually and sexually curious student now dressed in a college sweatshirt. The narrator almost confesses his secrets to her as well, alluding to his paranoia about the auteur plotting to kill him, which she in turn interprets as a passing fantasy everyone has entertained. Fresh from killing Sonny, the narrator drowns his sorrows in a lustful night with Lana. He subdues and neutralizes Sonny by murdering him in cold blood, and Lana by sexual conquest. "I gripped the AK-47 as I had Lana's arms the night after I had left Sonny's place" (299). Both Sonny and Lana represent the greatest challenges to the narrator's cover, and they become catalysts for his own self-subversion.

Before he can reflect further upon his motives for murdering Sonny or linger even more on his sexual conquest of Lana, the narrator returns to Vietnam with three of the general's men on an impossible mission to fight one last battle. A post-war wish fulfillment, the band of four men enacts the Vietnamese exile's ultimate fantasy: to retake the country and restore the past. The past does indeed return. We are reintroduced to Claude, still working for the CIA but using a refugee agency as a front. The movie "The Hamlet" returns, and the narrator finally watches the one scene he says he did not see before: Mai's controversial rape scene. The concluding chapters make what go before read like an elaborate screen memory to block the arrival and acknowledgment of the narrator's doing nothing in the face of human suffering.

Reading *The Sympathizer* and recalling Nguyen's own academic career, we see how a writer trained primarily as a scholar might deploy their intellectual research interests beyond the standard academic monograph, journal article, or conference paper. The narrator-spy's intellectual preoccupations, theory-infused language, and argumentative style brings to mind Nguyen's first book, *Race and Resistance: Literature and the Politics of Resistance*

(2002). In the conclusion to *Race and Resistance*, Nguyen writes: “If model minority discourse tends to idealize the model minority, the discourse of the bad subject responds by tending to idealize the bad subject, ignoring the contradictions and excesses that make the bad subject amenable to discipline by dominant society. Thus Asian American intellectuals often implicitly posit model minority discourse and the discourse of the bad subject as a binary, although in what follows I hope to demonstrate their mutual interdependency. Asian American can frequently occupy both situations simultaneously or, at the very least, alternate between them” (144). We can and ought to read *The Sympathizer* as a novelization of this argument, a portrait of the Asian American intellectual as a young novelist. The characters we encounter in the novel are part of a larger class of intellectuals, broadly defined in *Race and Resistance* to include academics, artists, activists, and political leaders, their commitments continually tested to prove the author’s point about how situational, motivated, and disciplinary are our most public positions and actions.

The Sympathizer stages and reenacts this critique of Asian American intellectual practices, casting the narrator in the role of the intellectual caught between competing discourses and alternating between them. Consequently, the narrator moves between Sonny and Lana, who embody the bad subject and model minority respectively, and in terms of characterization, they seem to me the novel’s best efforts. Returning to *The Sympathizer* with *Race and Resistance* in mind, it becomes easier to see how and why our narrator executes the bad subject (Sonny) while exploiting the model minority (Lana). The academic monograph levels a critique at the “consensus” of Asian American literary critics “predisposed to read for resistance,” despite what Viet Thanh Nguyen highlights as examples of Asian American literature that embody a politics of accommodation. The argument builds a rather monolithic edifice and projects ideological sameness (consensus) onto the “whole” “class” of Asian American intellectuals(v). Performing the kind of critical work espoused in *Race and Resistance*, *The Sympathizer* is neither resistant nor assimilationist in its exploration of a politics of sympathy.

Nguyen begins by writing a counter-narrative, an exhaustive correction to Vietnam War representation and Asian American protest novel, and ends by writing something like a fictional sequel to his first academic book, a novel

uncertain of its status as a committed work. His critical and satirical approach allows for an unsparing critique, sometimes to great effect. The depiction of the Vietnamese wedding, for example, is a deliciously comic and knowing set piece, featuring “the Clark Gable mustache playing dead on his upper lip, an adornment favored by southern men who fancied themselves debonair playboys” (112). The episodes involving the auteur and his movie also provide plenty of comic and critical material. Offering his opinion of the auteur’s screenplay in which “the achievement of narrating a movie about our country where not a single one of our countrymen had an intelligible word to say,” the narrator quips, “You didn’t even get the screams right.” *The Sympathizer* undoubtedly excels at intelligent ridicule; however, in pursuing its pedagogical aims, the novel often runs the risk of reanimating dominant war-era stereotypes in order to exact its critical vengeance.

Sympathy, the novel teaches us, is dangerous; and like its other side, betrayal, it can be a form of subversion. Despite multiple diagnoses by the general and the commandant, it turns out that the problem with our narrator is not that he is “too sympathetic,” but rather that he is not sympathetic enough. I mean that both in the sense of his character within the us-and-them world of the novel and his fictional characterization. He is supposed to be a dangerous man, a subversive, precisely because of his capacity for entering into and hence manipulating the thoughts and feelings of others, that is, just short of being actually affected by the suffering or sorrow of another. The narrator has no problem performing sympathy in most cases, but in key moments when faced with actual human suffering his calculated inaction betrays him as a self-serving egoist. In truth, we witness the narrator continually failing his sympathy exams. Late in the novel, for example, when the narrator breaks down under interrogation in the examination room, he finally divulges how he stood by and watched three South Vietnamese policemen gang rape a communist agent during a special interrogation session. In retrospect, the narrator’s brooding over the question of representation turns out to be a displacement, a screen memory for what he has failed so far to represent in his own confession. There are not just one, but two rape scenes described at length, the first the delayed film version in “The Hamlet,” the second the narrator’s repressed memory—the real confession—of the gang rape he witnessed as a young spy and double agent on the job.

The narrator's memory of the scene is shot through with the language of education, in which Claude acts as the American CIA agent training his South Vietnamese allies in advanced interrogation techniques from a special manual. Both scenes submit their female subjects to prolonged descriptions of sexual violence: "a human octopus writhing at the cave's center, the naked Mai struggling under the backs and limbs of the half-naked rapists" (287). When the narrator recalls asking Claude "Is this really necessary?" we hear the echo of the same question put to the auteur early in the novel. Given the narrator and the novel's expressed concerns about the problem of representation, what is the reader meant to learn from this representation of sexual violence? Sitting down with the filmmaker before the problematic shooting day, the narrator "asked him whether a rape was really necessary. It just seemed a little heavy-handed" (163). I could not help but ask the same question about Mai's rape scene. Of course, the novel makes the suspended episode necessary to the reeducation of the narrator, his delayed recognition of his lack of the kind of sympathy that activates intervention.

The lessons imparted by the negative example of *The Sympathizer's* narrator are neither new nor original, but still necessary and unfortunately timely. As a didactic political novel, *The Sympathizer's* unstated mission is to instruct both older American readers tainted by decades of bad Vietnam War representation in popular culture, literature, and film and a younger generation for whom America's war in Vietnam has been overshadowed by the Iraq War and the War on Terror. At stake is not only the reeducation of our narrator, but also the reeducation of the reader. Here, we are told, is the corrected version. The *Sympathizer* seems to have been taken up by an American readership crying out for exactly the kind of reeducation it promises, even as we forget that what we typically expect from our best novels is something more than critiques of easy political targets. Its American readers are receiving still-needed cultural training. Instead of reeducation camp, however, it's now your book club. In what amounts to his final lesson, the narrator deconstructs the revolutionary slogan he once was willing to die and kill for: "Nothing is more precious than independence and freedom" (331). The narrator attacks the empty meaning, adding that "*Nothing is also more precious than independence and freedom.*" His education has come to nothing he concludes: "With that one word, I completed my reeducation" (369). "I was mad that it had

taken me so long to understand nothing,” the narrator says, and this reader must confess he felt the same way.

In the end, I found myself unable to ever fully cathect to the characters and their suffering. I wanted to invest in individuals, not fixed ideas; the flux of human experience, not its explanation. “Our life and our death have taught us always to sympathize with the undesirables among the desirables. Thus magnetized by experience, our compass continually points toward those who suffer” (381). *The Sympathizer* leaves off with the language of the opinion pages, a take-home message applied like a balm to assure us that even a broken moral compass such as that of our narrator’s might still be fixed, recalibrated, and set true. But it is hard to believe the confessions of a bogeyman, created to frighten readers into correct thinking and fellow feeling. By the end of the novel, the narrator has shed the first-person, cloaking himself in the first personal plural of we-the-refugees as he plans that most American of narratives, to light out for new territory, to wipe the slate clean and begin again. We get the sense that he is not only in flight from this country, but also the regime of his own narrative construction, an escapee from the reeducation plot. Maybe in his new life he will become truly sympathetic, after all.

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In discussing the character of ethnic literature in America, Viet Thanh Nguyen writes, “the author’s identity and body is relevant because art exists in a social world where readers and writers bring their prejudices to the act of reading” (*Nothing Ever Dies*, 211). This is certainly the case in my reading of Viet Thanh Nguyen’s two books, *Nothing Ever Dies* and *The Sympathizer*. I approach the books from the perspective of a Vietnamese refugee living in the United States. It is no secret that more than forty years after the Vietnam War ended, Vietnamese people remain deeply divided. Here, I would like to discuss a few aspects of Viet Thanh Nguyen’s books that are particularly interesting to me, a Vietnamese refugee.

Viet Thanh Nguyen came to the United States when he was a child, whereas I arrived as an adult. Like millions of Vietnamese living in South Vietnam, my family was on the losing side of the Vietnam War, and we were severely punished by the communist victors after 1975. Vietnamese from South Vietnam thus did not consider the communists as liberators. And we still despise them, not only because of bitter experiences in the past, but also because we see them as the main cause of despair for the Vietnamese today. It is important to realize that the so-called anticommunism of the Vietnamese diaspora is a political reaction to a specific authoritarian regime, and not just a disavowal of an abstract ideology. Not recognizing this, it is easy to dismiss the politics of overseas Vietnamese as vindictive.

From the perspective of a refugee, it is encouraging to see South Vietnam given attention in Viet Thanh Nguyen’s books. Most American authors writing about the Vietnam War today are interested only in having a dialogue with their former enemies, the Vietnamese communists, and conveniently ignore the Vietnamese who fought alongside Americans during the war. Viet Thanh Nguyen acknowledges the unfair treatment of South Vietnamese in American and state-sponsored Vietnamese accounts of the war. South Vietnam is absent from American war memory because Americans do not want to associate ourselves with “the weak and the defeated” (*Nothing Ever Dies*, 44). In Vietnam, the communist government has long tried to erase South Vietnam from the country’s war memory. For example, it denies visitors access to the cemetery of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam located just outside Sài Gòn, and even destroyed a number of the tombstones (*Nothing Ever Dies*, 37). Rejected by Americans and humiliated by the

Vietnamese communists, those of us from South Vietnam, many of whom now live in the United States, insist on memorizing the war for ourselves. Viet Thanh Nguyen characterizes this phenomenon as “the ethics of remembering one’s own as practiced by the less powerful” (*Nothing Ever Dies*, 43).

South Vietnam, nevertheless, appears briefly in *Nothings Ever Dies*. The book focuses more on the “asymmetry” between the war memory in America, Vietnam, and to some extent, Cambodia and Laos. Generated by a powerful memory industry, the war memory in America has always overshadowed the war memories of the “weaker powers.” As analyzed by Viet Thanh Nguyen, such asymmetry produces only a limited understanding of the war. Although this criticism is correct, the author should also point out that the war memory in Vietnam is itself not weak. It has and continues to be used not only to justify the absolute rule of the communist party, but also to punish anyone who dares to challenge communist historiography. While it is true that both the Vietnamese communists and overseas Vietnamese only want to remember the “humanity” of their own and expose the “inhumanity” of their enemies, the two sides operate in opposite political systems. The Vietnamese government can silence, even imprison, those who disagree with it. Overseas Vietnamese have no such power though, and they live in the United States, where freedom of speech is protected. It would be more thorough if the author had pointed out this asymmetry. The Vietnamese communists and overseas Vietnamese are not equal victims of the American memory industry.

In *Nothing Ever Dies*, Viet Thanh Nguyen advocates for a Vietnamese “just memory” by contrasting the disadvantaged position of those writing about the war in Vietnam against the powerful industry of memory in the United States. The Vietnamese authors cited by Viet Thanh Nguyen, however, are all associated with the Vietnamese government, in one way or another. Their works, unfortunately, have nothing to do with the experiences of the Vietnamese from South Vietnam. Viet Thanh Nguyen seems unaware of the rich and excellent literature of South Vietnam, the overseas Vietnamese-language literature published after 1975, and the vibrant underground literature in Vietnam today. These literatures include many sophisticated works, some by the most important authors of contemporary Vietnamese literature, on a wide range of subjects related to the Vietnam War. Unpublished in Vietnam, these literatures are also rarely translated into English for American readers.

Although *Nothing Ever Dies* is a book written mainly for American readers, it should be read widely in Vietnam, especially by those in power, for if these people can agree with the author's call for a "just memory" and "unconditional forgiveness," the country could begin to heal its wounds. Unfortunately, the communist regime in Vietnam would most likely ignore Viet Thanh Nguyen's call. Viet Thanh Nguyen quotes Thích Nhất Hạnh, but even Thích Nhất Hạnh himself failed to encourage the Vietnamese government to move towards reconciliation. In his return to Vietnam in 2007, Thích Nhất Hạnh organized ceremonies to pray for the Vietnamese, on both sides, who died during the war. After lengthy negotiations, the government allowed the ceremonies to take place in three cities, but only under the condition that the dead from South Vietnam would not be included in the prayers. After Thích Nhất Hạnh left Vietnam, his disciples were harassed and finally evicted from their temple in Bảo Lộc. The only war memories accepted by the communists are those that benefit them politically and economically, such as the ones on display at the War Remnants Museum in Sài Gòn. Distorted and faulty, that museum attracts many American tourists daily.

If South Vietnam, and to a lesser extent, overseas Vietnamese, occupy only a small space in *Nothing Ever Dies*, they are the main players in *The Sympathizer*. For the most part, the novel is an accurate depiction of the Vietnamese community in America in the late 1970s. This is a community of people who have gone through a bloody war, lost everything and are now trying to survive in a new country. I do not feel affronted by Viet Thanh Nguyen's satire of overseas Vietnamese, for they are what they are, and humor is *The Sympathizer's* main draw. That said, I found a few details in the book unconvincing.

The protagonist in *The Sympathizer* seems too American for a Vietnamese refugee who arrives in the United States as an adult, and thus has only lived in the country for a short time. Although the author provides reasons for the protagonist's perfect pronunciation of English, including the fact that he was taught some English in Vietnam by a missionary when he was a child, such explanations are weak. The protagonist also carries himself with the confidence of a person who is very comfortable with the American way of life, which from my own experience and observation of other overseas Vietnamese, is an extremely rare case for new immigrants. Although the protagonist has studied a few years in America before 1975, realistically, it is

still impossible for him to display such an extensive knowledge of American culture. In fact, he appears more like an Asian American scholar criticizing American culture than a refugee trying to survive in a new country. Moreover, the protagonist's portrayal of his fellow Vietnamese tends to reflect the viewpoint of a Vietnamese American who comes to America at an early age, rather than one who comes as an adult. These points, as insignificant as they might appear to American readers, to me show that *The Sympathizer* is a story told from the perspective of an Asian American rather than a Vietnamese refugee.

I also find the scene of three South Vietnamese policemen raping a female communist prisoner ambiguous. Given the brutal reality of the Vietnam War, how often these crimes took place on each side and whether they were isolated incidents or systematically practiced are important questions. Unfortunately, these questions might never be answered, for as Viet Thanh Nguyen points out: "rape is one of war's most unspeakable consequences" (*Nothing Ever Dies*, 228). While there are statistics for death, there are no statistics for rape. I am not interested in debating whether the particular rape depicted in *The Sympathizer* is a faithful reflection of history. What make this scene appalling to me, nevertheless, are the details. They bring into focus not only an awful crime but also a jaundiced stereotype of South Vietnam. Under the observation of an American advisor and two Vietnamese commanding officers, the three policemen rape the female communist agent, using sexual violence as a method of interrogation they learned from the American advisors. They quarrel with one another over whose turn it is to rape the woman, because as typical Vietnamese, they do not understand "the concept of a queue." They complain about "the mess" left behind by the preceding rapist, but each, "undeterred by the mess, repeats the predecessor's motions . . . reaching, in a few minutes, the same obscene conclusion." Afterwards, they insert a Coke bottle into the prisoner's body and joke about it. As sadistic as they are, the men are depicted as clumsy, their behaviors childish. In the author's words, these policemen are not men; they are, "after all, mice" (351).

There is no doubt that this is an important and highly symbolic scene in the novel. It suggests that the war in Vietnam was, after all, a brutal fight between the Vietnamese. The depiction of the rape, nonetheless, seems to feed into popular stereotypes: that the United States was the master and South Vietnam the puppet, that South Vietnam's military was corrupt and

incompetent, and its soldiers were either rapists or pimps, among other derogatory labels. Ironically, I find the depiction of this rape as heavy-handed as the one in the Hollywood movie that the protagonist ridicules. Auteur, the Hollywood director in the novel, chooses Vietnamese men of “distinctive physical features,” those with “rotten banana brownness of their skin and the reptilian slits of their eyes,” to play Việt Cộng rapists and asks them to “have fun, be yourself” (164). Viet Thanh Nguyen himself describes the policemen as ugly, and their private parts as funny-looking: “one pointing up, another down, the third bent to the side” (350). Like the actors having fun playing the Việt Cộng, the three policemen laugh as they rape the communist agent. While ridiculing the Hollywood director for including the rape scene, a cheesy cinematic trick, it is interesting that Viet Thanh Nguyen features a similar scene in his novel. When criticized by the protagonist for keeping the tacky rape scene in the movie, the director reacts: “A little shock treatment never hurt an audience . . . Sometimes they need a kick in the ass so they can feel something after sitting down for so long . . . This is war, and rape happens. I have an obligation to show that” (163). I wonder if Viet Thanh Nguyen might use the same argument to justify his own depiction of the rape scene in the novel. Such a scene, as the protagonist says, is not “really necessary” (163).

Nothing Ever Dies and *The Sympathizer* are remarkable books written by an author who is deeply knowledgeable about the Vietnam War, American culture, and Vietnamese culture. This allows him to speak about the war to both Americans and Vietnamese. American readers might be too careful to criticize an ethnic writer writing about “his own people” while Vietnamese readers may demand more from a writer they consider one of their own. The matter becomes more complicated because the Vietnamese remain deeply divided about the Vietnam War. There has not been much controversy among the Vietnamese surrounding *The Sympathizer*. This may be because few Vietnamese have read the entire book, since it is in English. A publisher in Vietnam has been trying to release a translation of the novel, without compromising its integrity. It is my hope that in the near future, more Vietnamese, in the diaspora and Vietnam, will have access to a faithful translation.

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